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CRISIS OF CLASSICAL EUROPEAN ETHICS IN THE PRISM OF ANTHROPOLOGY

European ethics and anthropology have always been in close connection with each other since their common genesis in the thought of Aristotle. The character of this connection changed with time, however. Philosophy of Stagirite develops a comprehensive ethical discourse, strikingly elaborate and detailed; and this ethics of Aristotle provides all basic contents to his anthropology. Such a relation between discourses is in no way caused by author's whim. To the great extent, it was still unknown to the Greek mind what is a human person as such, "an sich", on its own; while, on the contrary, nearly everything was known firmly about how this person can and should act in the world that surrounded and determined it, world of Greek polis with its rules and problems. In other words, there was just a scanty base of properly anthropological data, but a very rich base of data for ethics. Hence it was unavoidable that at the origin of European thought anthropology was created and constituted on the basis of ethics, with its help and, in a sense, as its derivative.

Since that time millenniums have passed, encompassing all the history of this thought; now European mind considers itself to be already in the late, declining stages of its way. At this late period it found itself in the situation, which is a bit similar to that at the origin: the sphere of scientific discourse (in the humanities, at least) and cultural practices is to be constituted anew, since general structure of this sphere (definitions, relations, borders of disciplinary discourses, cultural and artistic practices, etc.) as well as its basic discourses and practices are in a deep crisis. Areas, where the crisis is most radical, and hence new principles are sharply needed, include both ethics and anthropology. However, in another aspect the present situation is quite opposite to that at the origin. Today European mind has in its disposition extremely vast anthropological database; but it became unknown, to a very large extent, how a human person can and should act, and whether there are any firm landmarks in the ethical dimensions of his world.

Hence it follows that the strategy of the mind should also be opposite. Anthropology comes first. One has to discern the figure of a present-day human, its contours and traits, which means to outline an anthropological model, adequate to our actual anthropological situation and knowledge; and then to ask what kind of ethics is inherent to such figure. If in the Aristotelian origin the development of the discourse and episteme proceeded from ethics to anthropology, then now this development should rather go the other way round: i.e. from anthropology to ethics. In this talk I am going to present a concrete example of such strategy. We shall describe the essence and progress of the crisis of classical ethics as well as classical anthropological model; then we discuss possible (or already existing) types and kinds of non-classical anthropology; and finally, picking up a certain variant of the latter, corresponding to the hesychast practice in Eastern Orthodox Christianity (and studied in detail in my works), we present a brief outline of non-classical ethics implied by hesychast anthropology.

1. The crisis of classical ethics: stages of the development, causes and mechanisms

Adopting popular postmodernist style, the stages in question (coinciding essentially with those of the decline and fall of classical metaphysics) can be conceived as a series of deaths or else expulsions.

- (A) The expulsion of Plato: rejection of platonic ontology or *kosmos noetos*, called by Nietzsche the “futile decoration of Other Being”. This stage has been basically completed to the end of the 19th c. To this time the noticeable presence of platonizing metaphysics in European thought was probably restricted to Russian religious philosophy, the paradoxical constitution of which combined backward and avant-garde elements.
- (B) The expulsion of Descartes: rejection of the Cartesian construction of epistemological subject. This famous “death of subject” was discussed most extensively in the last decades, so we do not dwell on it. The fruit of critical work by many big thinkers (Nietzsche, Bergson, Husserl, Vladimir Soloviev e.a.), it was taking place mostly in the beginning of the 20th c.; Cartesian epistemological subject has hardly survived the First World War.
- (C) The expulsion of Kant: rejection of Kantian ethical subject. It is important to notice that this “death of ethical subject”, though it is logically in the direct connection with the death of epistemological subject, and nearly implied by it, took place later and for different reasons. In contrast to the latter, its reasons were not theoretical. The ethical subject has deceased as a result of the Second World War and the experience of the nazist and soviet totalitarianism, which was quite correctly interpreted as a total bankruptcy of classical ethics. The famous question: *How is theology possible after Oswiencim?* is ethical exactly as much as it is theological, and is the definitive, even if implicit, declaration of death of the ethical subject.

Today all principal springs and mechanisms of this negative process are clear to us. The factors contradicting classical metaphysics (of which the important part was classical ethics) were of both theoretical and practical nature, but in both cases basically the same features of classical discourse came under fire. Broadly speaking, it was mainly the abstract, normative, substantialist and essentialist character of this discourse, added with the epistemological core of the latter, the subject-object cognitive paradigm. Gradually, all concepts and statements implementing these features proved to be nothing but artificial constructions and unjustified postulates coming in contradiction to the reality of human being and action. One can say *grosso modo* that the death of epistemological subject included the rejection of all substantialist standings, while the death of ethical subject lead one eventually to the necessity of parting with all essentialist standings, including such fundamental ideas as ethical norm (and all other norms) or the essence of man. Deprived of its classical and Aristotelian foundation, and searching for new principles and models both in ethics and anthropology, philosophy now needs to turn to non-classical discourse.

2. What is non-classical discourse?

Of course, the search for alternatives to the classical metaphysical tradition has a long history in European thought. At closer look, we find, however, that until the most recent period fruits of this history were not particularly rich or variegated. Each philosophical epoch knew its rebels, who did not want to accept the dominating trend; but one can see a posteriori that almost all the body of their work falls into very few typical categories. There were many attempts to articulate vague ideas or intuitions coming from areas neighbouring upon philosophy, from psychological, religious, mystical or romantic discourse; but, as a rule, such

attempts failed to reach proper conceptual culture, organization and method demanded by philosophy. There were many illusory alternatives: often some concept of really or seemingly not essentialist nature (like will, life, act, symbol, etc.) was chosen and then turned into constitutive principle of a system of the basically classical type, which meant that, whatever its real nature was, it was treated as an essentialist category. In some cases, constructions of such kind provided not completely illusory, but still imperfect and incomplete “overcoming of metaphysics”, to use the key formula coined by Nietzsche. Such half-way, not too radical alternatives include some popular philosophies of the last century, of which existentialism and dialogical philosophy are probably the most significant examples. However, the present crisis proves to be so total that it strikes this type of philosophy as well, whence we conclude that there was no sound alternative to the classical tradition created from within, by this tradition itself.

With one important exception, however. Poststructuralist and postmodernist philosophy of the last decades, rooted firmly in Western thought, at the same time breaks with the classical discourse in the most radical way. Pursuing to the extreme the logic behind Nietzsche’s declaration of “death of God”, it declares death of all basic principles and values of the classical worldview, including finally death of man and history. Again like Nietzsche’s philosophy, it is in no way restricted to pure declarations, but presents treatment of classical problems under new angles and new original interpretations of psychological, social and historical phenomena. Adopting concepts of psychoanalysis as well as its sharply anti-ontological standing, it also develops a specific topological discourse, which replaces the ontological discourse of preceding philosophy. – Thus there is here a real alternative to all the classical *Weltanschauung* and mode of philosophizing. But nevertheless it is hardly a viable alternative. Development of postmodernist thought was supported by predominantly negative stimuli and directed to predominantly negative goals; and when this *Via negationis* is pursued to its limits, it can only end in a deadlock. Today poststructuralist thinking is already nearing this stage; quite visibly, it has lost its momentum and has its potential nearly exhausted.

Hence it follows that to be fruitful, the search for philosophical (ethical, in particular) alternative(s) should go out to some new spaces and draw upon new fields of human experience that stayed so far out of the orbit of Western philosophy. In the last decades this viewpoint has been voiced repeatedly, and the most obvious choice for the new fields was seen in non-European traditions, such as Buddhist, Taoist or Islamic. The preceding discussion makes it clear, however, that it is not geographical or ethno-cultural or even religious otherness that matters, but character of the discourse, which should be different from the rigid essentialist discourse of the classical Western philosophy. Looking closely, we find that indeed Eastern traditions possess the discourse of desired alternative character, and in all cases such discourse comes from specific anthropological or mystico-ascetic practices that constitute the core of these traditions. Such practices are cultivated in ancient schools of mystico-ascetic experience and called usually spiritual practices or traditions (which is not adequate because of their holistic, and not purely spiritual nature); typical examples of them are provided by Tibetan tantric yoga, Taoism and Sufism. They develop rich anthropological, psychological, mystical discourse, whose nature and structure is diametrically opposite to that of the discourse of Western metaphysics. It was created for practical goals and is devoid of any abstract notions (including such basic ones for Western mind as essence or nature of man), but nevertheless it contains perfectly full-fledged and self-consistent anthropology. Thus it represents a valuable resource for the renewal of European philosophical discourse; but two important factors should be taken into account.

First, the difference between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions and modes of thinking is so big that the discourse of Eastern, especially Far-Eastern, spiritual traditions with all its rich anthropology that includes also psychological, philosophical and mystico-theological dimensions excludes not just abstract notions, but any notions or concepts in the

European sense. At closer contact with these traditions, European mind found that all their basic terms such as *dharma*, *paramita*, *nirvana* or, say, *satori*, cannot be interpreted or even reinterpreted as notions so that they remain untranslated as a rule. Meanings are put here into units or blocks, having extremely different properties and nature, and the organization of the discourse follows different rules and logic. As a consequence, while practical contents of Eastern traditions are now used widely and fruitfully in the West, in the sphere of philosophical discourse the mixing of so heterogeneous traditions has doubtful prospects. Second, all Eastern traditions express the worldview, to which the fundamental Christian and Western idea of personality, both human and Divine, is utterly alien. Evidently, adopting their discourse, one adopts also their vision of man and world, at least in its general character; and so one should reject all European profoundly personalist way of thinking reflected in dozens of ideas, attitudes, institutions, not only Christian, but also completely secular. Ideas like personal being, personal intercourse, autonomy of personality are directly connected with structures of self-identity, so that these structures should suffer deep changes too. Sure, the profundity of the present crisis implies that changes should be radical enough; but still in this situation it is worth to think twice.

Now, it is time to remember that the sphere of spiritual traditions includes one phenomenon, for which both factors discussed do not take place. It is the hesychast tradition in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Mystico-ascetic practice developed in this tradition shows all typological and structural features defining spiritual practice. Its discourse has been mainly worked out in Byzantium and is different enough from that of the classical Western metaphysics to present a real alternative to it. But at the same time its original language is Greek and it shares with the classical Western tradition the common fundament in works of Greek Church Fathers and basic ideas of Christian worldview. Due to this, the two discourses are not closed to each other.

3. From non-classical anthropology to non-classical ethics: the example of Hesychasm

In 1351 Council of the Greek Orthodox Church in Constantinople put an end to what was perhaps the most important episode in the history of hesychasm: the so-called Hesychast Controversy, in which the foundations of hesychast practice were first sharply disputed, but eventually found to be fully in accordance with the Christian doctrine. The famous dogmatic statement (*Tomos*) of this Council defined precisely the character of the relation between the created (human) and uncreated (Divine) modes of being: created being can reach contact with the energies of Divine Being, but not with the essence of it. This statement *eo ipso* defined the dogmatic and ontological meaning of hesychast practice, the core of which was the art of incessant prayer: it is exactly the contact or union of the two kinds of energy, human and Divine, belonging to ontologically separated modes of being, that had to be achieved by means of ascetic works. The negative part of the statement was no less important: since Divine Essence was stated as strictly imparticipable, all the anthropological process of the practice concentrated on human energies and amounted to a certain specific transformation of them, which had to bring them all to the union with Divine Energy. What is more, the kind of union that is restricted to energy only and can in no way include essence has a very special character. It cannot be made stable or fixed forever, and the movement to it cannot be irreversible and progressive advancement, but can be broken at any moment. Clearly, this fits very well the observed character of processes in religious or psychological phenomena, and ascetic literature abounds in descriptions of this most volatile dynamics. In a classical hesychast text of 4th c., attributed to St. Macarius the Great one reads: “You are as free as God and if you strive to perish, nobody is there to prevent you... However high a man ascends, he may always fall down”.

All this makes clear that hesychasm presents an approach to the phenomenon of man, which characterizes a human person by its energies, as an “energetic formation”, develops intricate technique of the self-transformation of such formation directed to its union with an ontologically different energy and completely avoids any essentialist concepts. In other words, it presents completely non-classical energetic anthropology. In some parts it is purely practical, while in certain themes such as laws and patterns of passions, manifold forms of attention or focusing of intellectual vision it includes sophisticated analysis of structure and states of consciousness. However, what we are now interested in is not this anthropology as such¹, but its ethical implications.

Undoubtedly, such implications do exist; it is easy to see that the hesychast energetic model of man leads to a definite ethical discourse. Its main distinction is determined by energetic nature of anthropology: it is also of energetic nature. It means that energetic connection of man with God, which is the constitutive principle of hesychast anthropology, is the constitutive principle of hesychast ethics as well. In anthropology this fundamental principle implies that all human acts or, more generally, anthropological manifestations derive their meaning from the constitutive God-man connection; and as soon as they lose such connection (which is always possible due to its energetic nature), they become meaningless. In ethics exactly the same logic is followed: any human act or anthropological manifestation derives its ethical meaning from the fundamental principle.

Let us look, how such derivation takes place. First of all, the fundamental principle represents as ethical principle, the form of which is completely obvious: what strengthens or supports the constitutive God-man connection is by definition “good”; what weakens or destroys this connection is “evil” (hence passions are evil *ex definitione* and represent the principal energetic locus of evil). But since the connection is only energetic, its strengthening or weakening, presence or absence are experiential facts, which are not subject to any abstract judgment or deduction. Whence the first cardinal distinction of hesychast ethics: because of its energetic nature, it is *experiential ethics* opposed to any abstract ethics. Implications of this fact are manifold; we mention just few of them. The fact means that ethical judgments can only be applied to phenomena within the sphere of the hesychast experience. In other words, the Ethical Space, i.e. the sphere of validity of ethical judgments, coincides here with the Space of the Hesychast Experience. The latter is, of course, much smaller than whole Human Space (space of human and social being), which serves as Ethical Space for classical European ethics; so we conclude that hesychast experiential ethics is not universalist all-human ethics. This property has been noticed and discussed (just in a few words, regrettably) by Fr. John Meyendorff who wrote: “In Byzantium one never succeeded in formulating secular ethics, for usual lay people”². Indisputably, it is a disadvantage for an ethical model; but still a few remarks should be made.

To start with, it should be stressed that one principal ethical relation, that of Christian love, expressed, in particular, in prayer, is not restricted to the Ethical Space. Both love and prayer are spread to all the Human Space and even more, to all the universe of life. Next, in most cases the universalist character of an ethical model means only that some abstract principle is claimed without sufficient grounds to be valid universally. In particular, this is the case with classical ethics based on the Kantian constructions of ethical subject and ethical law, which proved to be not universal at all (and surely not working in the present-day reality). Hence hesychast ethics has no disadvantage in this respect, at least, to classical ethics; and moreover, its disadvantage has important positive side, since its Ethical Space, though small, is based not on postulates, but on the firm ground of experience. Finally, the

¹ Reconstruction of hesychast anthropology can be found in my books (in Russian): *Dyptich of silence. Ascetic anthropology in theological and philosophical presentation*. Moscow, 1991; *The phenomenology of asceticism*. Moscow, 1998.

² J.Meyendorff. *Byzantine theology: Historical trends and doctrinal themes*. N.-Y., 1974. P.162.

restriction of the Ethical Space to the Space of Experience is not an arbitrary decision made *ad hoc*: on the contrary, it is the product of a general epistemological standing. In fact, in the hesychast tradition not only ethical, but any judgments are, strictly speaking, admitted only within the Space of Experience and should refer only to contents of this space; so that world is for this tradition “world-as-experience”, the experience being conceived as personal lived experience of an ascetic, corrected with the aid of collective experience of all the tradition. It immediately reminds of phenomenological epistemology based on the concept of lived experience (*das Erleben*). The parallel between the hesychast and Husserlian epistemology turns out to be profound and far-going; it is analyzed in detail in my “Phenomenology of Asceticism”. As a general feature of the hesychast method and vision, the phenomenological character is translated to the ethical sphere as well; and we can say that hesychast ethics is not universalist, because it is phenomenological. One more point, where this character shows clearly, is the attitude to the world, lying outside of the hesychast world-as-experience. In contrast to what was and still is very often said about ascetical and monastic ethics, the attitude of hesychast ethics to this external world alien to hesychast principles is not damnation or hate or condemnation. Such reactions were always characteristic of monastic fanaticism, but not the hesychast tradition as such. As for the tradition, in full accordance with the said above, it just considers this world as staying outside of the Ethical Space and hence not subject to any ethical judgment. Evidently, it is classical phenomenological attitude: bracketing all reality outside the limits of lived experience. In hesychasm this epistemological attitude does not imply complete indifference: as witnessed by ascetic texts, discovering something or somebody to be out of the Ethical Space, a hesychast would say: *I do not know what you are and I have fear for you*. This might be taken as a formula for the hesychast *Epoche*.

Now, after discussing the bounds of the Ethical Space, we must look inside and consider its inner organization. Again it is the energetic and experiential nature of ethical discourse that determines all its principal properties. There are no norms and laws regulating the fundamental God-man connection; hence there are no ethical norms and laws. It is sharply non-classical and anti-Kantian ethics. There is no *sittliche Gesetz*, no *Pflicht*. The words of St. Macarius quoted above represent polar opposition to Kant, they say that any human person, irrespective of all its preceding history, is at permanent risk to have its connection with God’s energy broken and *eo ipso* start doing evil. In contrast to Kantian ethics, hesychast ethics sees clearly that there is nothing in human nature to exclude the possibility of Oswienzim: if only for the simple reason that there is no such thing as “human nature” (at least, in the sense of the “essence of man”).

We started with negative characteristics, but it does not mean at all that hesychast ethics lacks positive principles. The fundamental God-man connection is not governed by any laws and norms, but it is very well known, on which principles it is based: it is principles of love and personal communion. They provide sufficient and efficient basis for making ethical judgments, but they are always applied to concrete experiential situations, and their presence does not make hesychast ethics a doctrine, it is rather like a live instruction or counseling. Contrary to other frequent accusations of ascetic ethics, it is not egoistic or purely individualistic. Surely, it is firmly based on the principle of Orthodox theology stating direct personal character of the God-man connection, so it cannot be collectivist or sociocentric ethics. But the God-man connection, being personal, includes at the same time rich inter-subjective aspects, which are reflected, e.g., in the popular ascetic maxim: *If you do not love your brother, who is in front of you, how can you love God, Whom you do not see?* These inter-subjective or “councilary” (russ. *soborny*) aspects are then translated to hesychast ethics; they were articulated especially in Russian hesychasm.

In their relation to the principles of classical ethics, basic positive principles of hesychast ethics could be better characterized not as un-normative, but rather extra-normative.

There is no need to deny the validity of ethical norms within some limits and bounds; but it is necessary to stress that in most important situations no norms can determine, how does love of Christ act. This extra-normative nature of Christian love was manifested most visibly in the so-called Russian eldership, a phenomenon in the recent history of Russian hesychasm, which started in the first decades of the 19th c. Russian elders were experienced hesychasts who made themselves spiritual counselors and teachers for hundreds and thousands of people of all types and kinds coming to them. Their activity was not preaching, but strictly personal contacts, in which they demonstrated the gift of seeing deeply into the inner reality of a human person; and due to this gift – which was nothing but the gift of extra-normative and seemingly inexhaustible love – they not just helped people to solve their problems, whatever kind they were, but made it possible for them to change this reality, introducing them into the hesychast way of life and making principles of this life close to them.

The experience of the Russian eldership is very little studied and understood so far. One can suppose that in this going-out of the hesychast tradition into the wide world some new form of hesychast experience was emerging, in which the space of hesychast experience was expanding considerably its limits. It would mean that the Ethical Space was also expanding; and may be, potentially, in the perspective, it could reach the limits of the whole Human Space? In its turn, it would mean that with the development of the phenomena like the Russian eldership hesychast ethics could develop into universalist all-human ethics, keeping always its experiential nature. However vague is such perspective, it deserves further analysis: the problem of the alternative to classical ethics which would not be just another abstract doctrine is too important.