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**Progress and Modernity:
Solovyov's Reverse Philosophical Perspective**

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**Прогресс и современность:
обратная философская перспектива Соловьёва**

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In this roundtable, the issue at stake is the so-called “modernity” (актуальность) of the philosopher Vladimir S. Solovyov, i.e. his relevance for our times. But what does it mean for a philosopher, or for an author in general, to be “modern” or “relevant” for the present time? Well, I am sure that Solovyov – as a “pure philosopher” as he undoubtedly was – would have started precisely from this question. In fact, this was generally how he used to begin his reasoning, that is, by questioning the problem itself.

If by “modernity” we mean the adherence of a thought to the canons (of style and content) of a certain historical era, then no author of the past can ever be modern. This seems obvious. If anything, it is possible to wonder in what terms an author of the past can help us understand the peculiar features of our time. In this case, it must

be said, some authors of the past lend themselves more than others to reading the present. Since our age is characterized by the fragmentation of knowledge into many disciplines that barely communicate with each other, but also by a predominance of a quantitative and empirical value of the academic research, and finally by a given idea of practicality and profitableness of knowledge itself, I would say that – if these are the criteria of the present day – Solovyov is less suited than other philosophers of the past to reading the present time “from the point of view of the present time.” After all, this is what we mean by the expression “modernity or relevance of an author” – that he or she helps us read *our time from our point of view*.

If this is true, Solovyov is the antithesis of what was said above: he has in fact a vision of absolute unity (and not division) of knowledge, on a basis that is certainly not empirical but metaphysical. Finally, his philosophy has nothing to do with a pragmatic view aimed at a predominantly material growth of our world, but rather is intended for a deeper understanding of the essence of the world itself. In this case, it seems that we are faced with a perfect antithesis of the current worldview and consequently Solovyov should rightfully be defined as “anti-modern.” But is this what is really important to us about the authors of past centuries: that they confirm what we already know? If this is all that interests us in the study of history (i.e. having confirmation that the knowledge of the present time is the best in absolute terms, because a thinker of the past – albeit in a “cruder” and less perfect way – had already realized it), the effort of historical study is really worth very little. Indeed, perhaps we could do without it and ignore the past because in the present we have already all the answers we need!

Contrary to all this, I think that the study of history, in order to have any meaning, must serve precisely to question the current model, not to confirm it. In this sense, paradoxically, the most interesting author of the past should be the one who is least suited to reading the present time in a closer way. True “modernity” is that of those who show a different and alternative point of view with respect to our present. In this sense (the truest one, in my view), Solovyov is an extremely modern philosopher because he, like few others, allows us to see the present from a different and, as it were, more objective angle. In a better way than other thinkers do, Solovyov reveals the characteristic traits of our time: those that I mentioned before, which, in sum, are the most peculiar features of positivism as it has developed in the last two centuries and, more particularly, from the end of the Second World War to the present day. Solovyov’s “scientific view” is, in many ways, the perfect alternative to the epistemological vision that lies at the basis of our “modern” world. From a positivistic point of view, Solovyov is an “outdated philosopher” because he does not present himself as a model that anticipated what would come. But from a reversed point of view, that is, the one that critically reads positivism in its fundamental need for confirmation of itself as a model of linear and evolutionary growth, Solovyov is one of the most “modern” philosophers of the past: I think he is very relevant, in that he

is “ahead” of us, not “behind” us. Speaking of “modernity,” then, the crux of the matter seems to be Solovyov’s critique of positivism.

But what is, in fact, positivism? If I had to define it in few words, I would say that positivism is a view that attributes to the scientific method, based on empirical data, an absolute value that leads humankind to constant improvement. Here we are dealing with a worldview that believes in the infinite growth of knowledge, based on linear and accumulative progress. This is why “originality” is such an important feature for it: because only a “new” element can add itself to the linear series. But that “novelty” is such only if it is suitable for the continuation of the series, so in reality it is not new at all but, to some extent, already foreseen. An important result of this process is also the overcoming of what is considered false opinion and the elimination of those researches that are considered “illegitimate” because they are not related to the method. In this regard, positivism is not inclusive.

From what has been said, it is not difficult to draw the reason why Solovyov was not a positivist and did not want to be one. As Nikolai Berdyaev clearly expressed, in Solovyov nothing can really be “excluded,” not even empiricism or rationalism, but everything is an inclusive part of knowledge: i.e. “holistic cognition,” as Solovyov names it. Someone might think that Hegel has already said this. Indeed, one of the main criticisms of Solovyov is that his philosophy is unoriginal because he mostly employed the ideas of Hegel, Schelling and Boehme. Lev Shestov, Nikolai Berdyaev and Alexandre Kojève, among others, maintained this position. I think that in many respects this is not true, but now, let us accept it for a moment. As I see it, the main point is that the “Russian idea” (using this expression as a technical term), to which Solovyov made a decisive contribution, perhaps never laid claim to any “originality” of this kind. The Russian idea, on the contrary, reveals the inner contradiction of the very idea of “originality.” It is worth noting that the very concepts of “theory” and “originality” are brought here to a state of crisis. The Russian idea brings the theory of originality to its limit and, so to speak, “breaks through” this limit. Solovyov’s philosophical experience is in itself a general search for the “limit” and a philosophical way to “think to the end.” Hegel or Schelling do not really do this, but Solovyov does, and he does it better than anyone else.

I repeat once again: Solovyov’s theory in itself is not and will never be more original than the theories of Hegel or Schelling. It does not claim to be like that. But here is what is important: Solovyov’s theory takes Hegel and Schelling to their limits: it makes them, so to speak, “explode,” showing how their theory, if it is authentic, *must come* to its own contradiction. I especially want to emphasize that Solovyov does not reveal the contradiction of the content of Hegel’s and Schelling’s theory, but the contradiction of the theory as such. Solovyov’s entire thought and life express this: a riddle and a contradiction. I really like Berdyaev’s expression when he says that there was a “Solovyov of the day” and a “Solovyov of the night.” All-unity is the unity of opposites, but above all of contradictions, which destroy the “positive form” as such. No “positive form” and no “positivism” exist in Solovyov. Whenever he

speaks of theocracy, theosophy or theurgy, one should bear in mind this fact: there is no such thing as a “positive idea” in Solovyov, that is, an idea that stands on its own without also including its own contradiction. How did Solovyov achieve this? I do not think that he achieved this thanks to the “critique of abstract principles”: after all, such a criticism is already present in Hegel, who gave it the name *Aufhebung*. I also do not think that Solovyov destroyed the “positive form” thanks to the fundamental distinction he made between being and essence. Rather, he achieved this by developing the idea of God-manhood, understood also in the epistemological sense – a sense that was very well developed, among others, by such thinkers as Pavel Florensky and Aleksei Losev. A “modern” study of Solovyov’s epistemology, in my opinion, should explore this particular aspect: antinomy in the most general sense, i.e. “all-unity” as an epistemological paradigm that includes opposites, where one pole allows us to better understand the other. True “all-unity” is not scientific monism, but discontinuity.

Solovyov is neither modern nor outdated. He is a classic like all the great authors in the history of philosophical thought. In his case, he is the greatest exponent of philosophy in Russia because he characterized it as the philosophy of a national culture but at the same time universal philosophy. Following the Neoplatonic tradition, Solovyov placed philosophy before its own contradiction: that of a particular knowledge that also becomes absolute, of a rational thought that also becomes life, and finally of being that questions its own foundation. Faced with these questions, even the problems of modernity or relevance or originality of his philosophy become “questions of the past.” Solovyov is beyond and before all these questions. This is the main feature of Solovyov’s philosophy: to produce an absolute and then to place it before its own authentic contradiction. I cannot think of a higher task for philosophy.