

Nominalism, Psychology and the Underground Man: The Revolt against the Mass

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Western ideology is based on some version of nominalism and its associated empiricism. The problem here is that, with this view, nothing has intrinsic meaning or purpose (since such meaning would not be an individual thing, but a concept, an essence). Therefore, if we seek meaning, then it must come from somewhere. It certainly does not come from me. It comes from how the elite (economic, scientific literary) have decided to give it meaning. It's all arbitrary anyway, so why not merely impose our interests on it and call it "truth?" Not only is that the essence of our time, there is no place to stand against it (Obolevitch, 2010).

Even worse, since nominalism must be materialist, then all reality is mechanical and hence, determined. So even if we discover some arbitrary place to stand, we have no clue if it is true or good. Both of these concepts are universals with meaning, hence are inadmissible to modern life. Good is self interest of the most powerful faction. Bad is the self interest of anyone else that conflicts with it.

Technocracy and the Orthodox Response

The greatest minds of the ancient Church maintained a strong sociological agenda. St. John Chrysostom's 4th century *On Wealth and Poverty* was a brutal, rhetorical attack on inequalities of wealth in Constantinople. St. Ambrose in his "On the Duties of the Priesthood" condemns private property as the very pinnacle of sin and the origin of social antagonism (Liebeschuetz, 2011). Both saints use language that is strikingly modern, showing that basic concepts of justice never change.

That Christ's Kingdom is "not of this world" does not mean Christ has nothing to do with the social order or that social life is somehow excluded from Christ's saving power. The Kingdom here can only come about through internal transformation, not political revolution. Revolutions, in other words, are brought about through changes in lifestyle. Civilization, after all, was the creation of Cain and eventually led to the Tower of Babel and Solomon's conversion to materialist paganism. Politics deals with parties and backroom deals. Justice and equity, however, are metaphysical truths (Kivisto, 1989).

To illustrate this point graphically, the famous Russian social theorist Nikolai Berdyaev (d. 1948), dealing with the religious roots of the Russian nihilism and revolution, states:

With this graceless asceticism, Nihilism is torn by a fundamental contradiction: it begins by wanting to emancipate personality and free it from the slavery of social surroundings, with their norms and rules, traditions and prejudices, and yet it finally enslaves the human person to social utility and the interests of society; it denies the right of personality to lead its own spiritual and creative life. . . because

it considers human personality to be a mere product of social surroundings, and denies its spiritual nature. . . The Russian soul is troubled not so much by any conflict between Christianity and science as by that between it and social truth, by the fact that Christianity backs up social untruth (Berdyayev, 1931).

This important passage is essential to the concept of sociology and the Christian life. St. John Chrysostom would not sit back while the semi-Christian, semi-pagan elites lorded it over their inferiors. He was exiled twice for his stand. Left-radicalism exists because the likes of St. John are often few. The arguments of the nihilists and communists, socially speaking, were not all that far from Sts. John or Ambrose.

The fact that Christ used violence to remove the merchants from the temple should not be forgotten. His denunciation of the power and pretension of the Pharisees could not have been harsher. His audacity was compounded by His own claims to be God (e.g. John 8:56-58). Even more, in the ancient world, an unemployed troublemaker who ends up tortured to death in the most humiliating fashion was not precisely the concept of the heroic crusader destined to liberate Israel (Kivisto, 1989). Christ's message about social life, identical to the prophets, could not be clearer.

In the Protestant world, the determinism of J. Calvin and Weber's treatment of it shows another clear affinity between social analysis and theology. The nature of the elect in Calvin is manifest in a pattern of godly conduct including hard work, avoidance of luxury and a lifelong rejection of indulgence. This was "sublimated" into what became the capitalist ethic, suffused with nominalism and the belief that nature existed solely for man's use (Zaret, 1992).

Darwin is comparable here. Writing in the midst of British industrialization and empire-building, Darwinians such as Herbert Spencer projected the competition for territory in the natural order onto the social one. It is no coincidence that the world's empires were engaged in the same competition as "natural selection" posits in nature. The destruction of one, say, the Spanish, in the interests of the British mercantile classes show that the latter was more fit, technologically speaking, to encircle the globe than the "backward" Spanish Catholics. To separate Calvin from Darwin, and Darwin from the industrial revolution is to misunderstand the relation between theology and sociology; it is to ignore how modernity came to be.

The Christian life is based on orderly thought and sobriety. This implies a strongly social and economic element to this life. The church is not asocial largely because she exists as a social institution, the church is a community. It is difficult to discover powerful social movements since Christ that have not been initially motivated by religion (Graham, 1969). Abolition, civil rights, pacifism and temperance are just four of the more well known examples. Nearly all the major figures in these social movements came out of the church (Falding, 1984, esp 10-11 and Cavanaugh, 1987).

Nominalism is the belief that only individual things exist. There are no universal entities such as "good" or "truth." All is based on how human beings (really, the elite) have sought to organize our world for us. Nominalism is the death of art, culture and truth. It says that there are no intrinsic connections among people, natural objects, or the cosmos as a whole. All is accidental and hence, meaningless. All that remains are cause and effect for no reason or final purpose.

Yet, what is an individual? Is it an object like a tree? Well, the tree might be considered a single thing, but we all know it's not. It has chemical, genetic, molecular and physical (visible)

parts. Why take the tree rather than the branch? Why separate the tree from the soil that surrounds it, or the ecosystem that holds the whole system of nutrients the flow of energy together? Hence, there are no individuals, there are no “species” except as empty constructs that connect to nothing real. There are culturally defined objects that are arbitrarily taken out of their environment.

So what is the truth of the matter? Is not the very existence of an ecosystem a rejection of nominalism? The system as a whole is the only thing we can call an individual. Yet, nominalism remains the standard “default” concept of reality that makes little sense, and seems to derive from the capitalist obsession with individuality and egotism. Egotism is to social life what nominalism is to thought. Nikolai Berdyaev writes:

With the growth of the might of technology and with the mass democratization of culture is connected a fundamental problem of the crisis. . . the problem of person and society. The person, aspiring towards emancipation, all more and more proves to be smothered by society, by socialization, by collectivization. This is the result of “becoming emancipated,” of the “technification” and democratization of life. The industrial capitalist order already, basing itself upon individualism and atomism, has led to a stifling of the person, to impersonality and anonymity, to the collective and mass style of life (Berdyaev, 1932).

Technology, for Berdyaev, is the shift of reality from “organism to organization.” Organism is natural, organization is not, as it is based on elite power and ideology masquerading as objective science. In capitalism, some individuals matter more than others. If we assume the nominalist view that all is based on individual self interest, then how can we complain when the rich oppress the poor? We can't, since they only do what we do, seek their own interests. We want the rich to have less power because it is in our interest to do so. The wealthy have it in their interest to expand their power as much as possible. Therefore, since these are all based on the same thing, they are morally equivalent (Boobbyer, 1995).

This is why nominalism is the death of art and culture. Without meaning, then all is flux. Without meaning, even the flux cannot be considered a “thing,” nor can our self-hood, community, nation, or planet. Our concepts of good and evil are meaningless universal words. By definition, modern science cannot define these at all, though they usually speak quite a bit about injustice as a meaningful universal when their grant applications are denied.

In the contemporary work of SG Kara-Murza, industrialism and technology require nominalist metaphysics, standardization of everything from time to entertainment and total quantification. In psychology, it slowly developed into behaviorism while in science, it is a naive positivism. Physics, much earlier, justified the rise of the “individual” with Newton's doctrine of random, purposeless motion while politics was redefined by Hobbes. The market, industry and nominalism developed together as the cosmos was seen as without purpose, based on random motion originating solely by chance.

What all of these have in common is a) power alone exists; b) social issues are separated from ethics; c) man has no purpose; d) all is calculation under given circumstances. That is the essence of the capitalist idea and its manifestation in merchant-technology and industry.

In Seymon Frank's “Crisis of Western Civilization,” describes industrialization as Faustian in that a) it seeks domination over nature; b) it derives from Renaissance alchemy; and

c) through the doctrine of evolutionary biology, the assumption that matter contains all things and hence, is divine.

The Faustian ideal as manifest in urban industrialism strips humanity of any and all purpose. Images substitute for reality as empiricism cannot justify itself. Transcendental deduction interiorizes experience as filtered through an a priori grid of categories. Yet, if image is all that is produced, then there is no reality and no truth. There is no access to any objective reality. Ultimately, the world becomes man's own projection, and the ideology of the elite easily decides what is real and what is not.

Frank is willing to admit that “blind nature” can produce truths, but only of an accidental and relative kind. There is one object, however, that refutes this idea, and that is our interior life. This is universal, infinite and free. It is a single spiritual principle that cannot be reduced to anything physical. It seeks the absolute good without change, which is not something that can be experienced in the natural order. God, eternal happiness and everlasting life are the desires of all humanity, and these desires are deduced from the nature of our awareness as having these qualities.

There is not a single piece of technology that does not come saturated with ideological meaning. The recent explosion in mobile devices touts its ability to improve communication, yet, with the nominalism that such things assume, what do we talk about? How arbitrary our present conversation is?

Information is not knowledge, nor is knowledge truth. Any collection of facts might be knowledge, but it does not make it truth, or an aspect of it. Reason only gives us the formal and external properties of things. Is this all there is? How can (modern) logic make the non-scientific and ideological claim that all that exists are “individuals” or formal properties?

It is inherently logical to believe that truth is only formal and external coherence? Why should I be logical to begin with? Is logic self-evident? Or do I first have to accept its ideological propositions as fact (which are beliefs, of course, a faith) before I believe that logic itself is truth? If I say that all nature is both mechanistic and material, is this scientific?

No, it is an ideological metaphysics that I have to take on faith, since logic does not tell me what reality is, only how to organize what I already believe to be reality. Science argues in a circle. It is based on faith that the nature of the world, our senses, and the “true” nature of reality exists in such a way that present logical thought conforms with it. Berdyaev writes:

In the social-political movements prevail principles of coercion and authority, with a diminishing of the freedom of man -- in Communism, in Fascism, in National Socialism there triumphs a new victory of materialism both economic and racial. Man as it were has grown tired of spiritual freedom and is prepared to renounce it in the name of power, with which to order his life, both inward and outward. Man is so constituted, that he can live either with a faith in God, or with a faith in ideals and idols (Berdyaev, 1932).

The simple fact that a conceptual grasp of some material reality is not the same as “truth” was too much for the materialist utopia. Unfortunately, both men wound up in that other attempt at a materialist utopia, the USA (or the western world in general).

Freedom assumes the spirit (that is, something that cannot be material, since all material

is determined), which, inherently is anti-nominalist. Freedom is a problem for most, a curse rather than a blessing. It has been turned into an arbitrary search for pleasure (or at least an avoidance of pain) that is purely determined by the constitution of our nerve endings and thus, not freedom in any sense.

BF Skinner and The Underground Man

In Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, the main protagonist, the Underground Man, rebels against the very mechanism and causality of the natural world that Behaviorism takes as its foundation. He states, in a rage against the allegedly universal cause and effect:

If there really is some day discovered a formula for all our desires and caprices - that is, an explanation of what they depend upon, by what laws they arise, how they develop, what they are aiming at in one case and in another and so on, that is a real mathematical formula - then, most likely, man will at once cease to feel desire, indeed, he will be certain to. For who would want to choose by rule? Besides, he will at once be transformed from a human being into an organ-stop or something of that sort; for what is a man without desires, without freewill and without choice, if not a stop in an organ?

Dostoevsky is speaking about positivism, nominalism and the naive conception of cause and effect so typical of 19th century materialism and Behaviorism. In it, the falsity of this approach can be seen, and any number of examples of its failure can be understood. Its failure is that it explains too much. Like utilitarianism, to hold that people are conditioned by pleasure and pain, relative to a specific stimulus and association, says little else but that man is a consciousness, will-less machine, just another hunk of matter for the scientific establishment to manipulate.

What does Behaviorism seek to do, what is its end point? Dostoevsky has already stated it: to derive a mathematical formula that predicts and fully explains all our actions. By using the concept of stimulus, response and association, they argue, all human desires, acts and thoughts are predictable in that they are inevitable relative to the state of the environment. The sole goal, therefore, is to render a map of the human person with such exactitude that all action is predicted as the seasons are. Watson and Skinner are not shy about admitting this (cf Skinner, 1969).

So what is the answer? It is a type of person (rather than any specific situation) who will remain unaffected by behaviorism of any kind. Since there is no aspect of life that behaviorism cannot affect, there is no reason for science to be used anywhere and everywhere behavioral modification is needed. Certainly, there is no grounds to argue against it, since the behaviorist rejects all such universal grounds as "metaphysical."

The Underground Man above, or some other similar type, will choose freedom even if it means being irrational by Watson's standards. Eventually, such a person will realize that things like logic, universal truths and even "causes" do not exist according to the behaviorist, and hence, there is no such thing as "irrationality." No one has seen any of these things. We might have seen manifestations of them, but we've never seen universal truth as such. It is difficult to see how a behaviorist, positivist or nominalist can consider an object at all, since it is arbitrary and groundless to take one hunk of matter, separate it from the whole, and give it a name.

It is not a specific situation that will resist conditioning, but a sort of personality. If

conditioning works on someone in education, then there is no reason why it will not work anywhere else. Therefore, it is a personality type that will refuse this kind of programming. Such a person runs the risk, as in *Walden II*, of being hospitalized for his anti-social behavior, but such a person might welcome such persecution, only because it shows behaviorism is naive. No one is conditioned to hold to such desires, since it is a visceral manifestation of will over objectification. Hence, behaviorism will have to result to chemistry to ensure compliance to the right stimulus. Psychotropics will (or can) eliminate this pesky will object that we all know does not exist.

“The whole work of man really seems to consist in nothing but proving to himself every minute that he is a man and not a piano key” the Underground Man continues. Yet again, a protest against the intellectual assumptions of Behaviorism. A piano key or any other mechanical device is not just a metaphor for positivism or behaviorism, but is the very conception of natural life and the human will.

Skinner writes in his (1978) “Brief Survey of Operant Behavior”

The innate behavior studied by ethologists is shaped and maintained by its contribution to the survival of the individual and species. Operant behavior is shaped and maintained by its consequences for the individual. Both processes have controversial features. Neither one seems to have any place for a prior plan or purposes. In both, selection replaces creation.

The fact that Skinner wanted to found a community exclusively based on a utopian conception of modified behavior shows that this concept is far more than a mere academic scientific enterprise: it is a revolution in how humans behave, or at least, how they think they behave. To say that “Operant behavior is shaped and maintained by its consequences for the individual” is to say precisely nothing. When utilitarianism says that humans seek after pleasure and avoid pain, it is as scientifically interesting as claiming that humans need water to live. It explains nothing because it explains everything.

It is this mentality, typical of the 19th and earlier 20th century that Existentialism fought with such vehemence. Modern science and philosophy had not merely asked questions, but constructed elaborate systems that purported to explain every thought and feeling of the human being. This meant that man was just one cog in a machine, one deluded in that he thought he was making free choices based on reason and experience. He is doing no such thing. In fact, using pronouns like “he” or “she” is unwarranted, since there is no integral, universal, whole “consciousness” that it can refer to. All that exists are nerve endings, senses and stimuli from internal or external sources. Other than that, all universals and species are figments of the metaphysical imagination.

Dostoevsky seems to suggest that there are two kinds of people: one kind that is quite satisfied with universal causality, because then, our actions can always be blamed on some outside source. It is the perfect ideology for capitalist Britain circa 1900. Kids can be worked to death in the factory because they are merely machines themselves (cf Skinner, 1969). Their existence or non-existence has no moral significance, and emotional anguish at their slow death is the mere prejudice of sentimentality.

Manipulating markets so that only the most fit survive to dominate is purely justified in the science of the day, of which Behaviorism finds its roots. Yet, the existentialist, of whom

Dostoevsky was one, is the other type of human being: the eternal rebel who would rather believe defiantly that $2+2=7$ than be forced to believe that $2+2=4$. The former is a function of freedom, the latter, of mechanism. Defiance is more utilitarian than necessity anyway. We can make the argument that this second type of person will not hold that numbers are universal truths discovered by mathematicians, but symbols that disclose aspects of unity and multiplicity that, in fact, are not quantifiable at all.

It is this second type of person who will rebel not merely at the behaviorist program, but the society that Skinner wanted to found. Programmed humanity that is conditioned to engage in the most socially optimal behavior will be excellent for most. This is especially the case if, at the same time, they consider themselves freely choosing it. Utopia, of course, is boring. Rebellion will quickly develop among those who would rather be “wrong” than conditioned. Behaviorism has no concept of “right” or “wrong” anyway, hence the normative nature of the program is arbitrary and external to behaviorism as such.

It is well known that Skinner advocated the concept that psychology should follow the method of the “natural sciences.” None of this, of course, can be reduced to Behaviorism. There was no specific stimulus or intrinsic association that brought Watson et al to insist that the methods of chemical analysis are applicable to human behavior. Nor can they claim that they freely decided on this course of action. There is no stimulus or association that shows nominalism to be true, or materialism for that matter. Behaviorists might have never seen a soul or a mind, but they have not seen a will or a cause either. They have never seen an idea, but they speak in abstractions all the time. “Man's struggle for freedom is not due to a will to be free, but to certain behavioral processes characteristic of the human organism, the chief effect of which is the avoidance of or escape from so-called 'aversive' features of the environment.”

Existentialists call this “bad faith.” It is the desire to place the locus of decision on some impersonal “other.” But that's just it, the “other” is impersonal, since someone has to control the environment (Rose, 1972). It is always attractive to have a method so simple as behaviorism. Being an academic is so much easier when one only has to justify two or three mechanisms of action. Idealism is just too messy. At the same time, as the state and concentrated capital grows in significance, power and even comes to structure our mental states, behaviorism is something that is not discovered, but forced upon someone. Some of these “someones” will refuse to have their behavior modified. Others will welcome any escape from responsibility.

Therefore, the answer to the question should be clear: the sort of person who will refuse conditioning is the Underground Man and those like him. It is the person who will argue, uselessly, that behaviorism and positivism deny all normative claims, and yet wish to structure society to reflect their conception of optimal behavior. Logic goes out the window when social power and grant money are at stake. Psychologist George Miller writes:

It was perceived as the point of origin for scientific psychology in the United States. The chairmen of all the important departments would tell you that they were behaviorists. The power, the honors, the authority, the textbooks, the money, everything in psychology was owned by the behavioristic school... those of us who wanted to be scientific psychologists couldn't really oppose it. You just wouldn't get a job (see Baars, 1986, 203).

The truth of this complaint lies in the fact that the behaviorist need not justify such authoritarian tendencies. This is because no justification is possible, and there are no solid grounds upon which to build one. Power is. That's as far as the sentence can go. Those who refuse, that is, engage in a vehement and specific act of will, the dogmatic assumptions and radical nominalism of the behaviorists will precisely be the ones that will not be affected by behaviorism, whether in the academy, in advertising or politics.

No behaviorism or subtype can address this situation if their assumptions are false and axiomatic, that is, unargued and assumed. Upon what ground can a behaviorist build an argument that materialism is true? Or universals do not exist? Or that logic is the only means to truth? Why should I be scientific or logical at all? Are these self-grounding? There is none, for if there were, behaviorism would be false. Therefore, it focuses on power since that is the only ground. "Universal Causality without beginning", albeit invisible, remains the ghost that lies at the root of this scientific mystification. Of course, nothing can be more metaphysical than this Universal Causality.

The Postmodern Empire of the liberal west has been the most unstable and destructive of them all. Nations that have survived totalitarianism, genocide and dictatorship begin to buckle only when exposed to liberalism. Liberalism is a solvent because it is based on nominalism: the ontology of death. The moment no universal objects or meanings exist, not only is the created order without purpose, but this also means that the elite get to decide what meanings exist at all. When language is detached from objects, and, at the same time, if language creates reality, then those who create language create reality. Postmodern liberalism is created by major media who chaperone all communication and socially acceptable language. Over time, in conditions of unchallenged nihilism, these corporate elites decide what is real and what is not.

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