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The Ethics of Mutual Understanding¹

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*The fox, never having seen the lion before
Is scared out of his wits when he first meets him.
A little later the lion appears again
And is already not quite so terrifying.
The third time the lion appears
The fox enters into conversation with him.
We are afraid of others
Until we get used to them.*

(I. A. Krylov, 'The Lion and the Fox')

Divided Society and Its Problems

The particular character of conflicts in the world today is linked to the fact that mass migration and technological developments within civilisation have greatly increased the intensity of contact between social groups – ethnic, social and religious – which are barely compatible.

In a traditional society, conflicts arose as a clash of interests at the juncture between groups which were quite monolithic within themselves. Religious or ethnic uniformity frequently corresponded with a specific territory and conflicts emerged as territorial disputes. Sometimes it was a matter of monolithic social groups with quite distinct spheres of influence (to the point where society was divided into castes).

In contemporary society there are no clear lines of division between the spheres of action of uniform groups united by a common mentality and common practical interests. To use a metaphor from natural mathematics, it can be said that the dividing line along which a clash of different interests takes place has a fractal character, that is, it does not involve just the peripheral members of a group who are closest to it, but the whole group. (The fractal line of division is such that no one feels sufficiently removed from it; everyone can be dragged into the conflict in the capacity of an active participant, and not simply a sympathiser with a particular side.) Most contacts between social groups with opposing interests are fraught with multi-faceted conflicts in which the interests of many parties are affected in a complex way.

It is this potential for the involvement in conflict of each and every one of us which is characteristic of what today we call 'divided society'.² The term 'divided' is used not simply for a society which consists of groups with differing mentalities and interests, but for a society in which these groups are in close contact and which

cannot be weakened by artificially-maintained segregation.

The existence of the Jewish quarter in a medieval town was not seen by its inhabitants as discrimination. To them it was rather a means of avoiding confrontation with a hostile society surrounding them. The segregation of blacks in the USA was perceived as a violation of freedom and sparked protests which led to a real opportunity for coexistence in one society. It did not lead to a mingling of races, but created an opportunity for close contact without eruption into conflict. There continued to be black areas in some American towns where all policemen were black to avoid unnecessary racial friction. There are still black universities with no white students, but this is not segregation on the part of the white majority, but voluntary segregation on the part of blacks who wish to emphasise their identity.

In the struggle for the rights of coloured people a very important role was played by the nonviolent movement led by black minister Martin Luther King, and in which many white American citizens also took part. This experiment in using nonviolent methods³ did in fact lead to the avoidance of the bloodshed and brutality characteristic of so many conflicts in a divided society. These conflicts lead to an escalation in violence, which follows a general pattern. A certain group becomes aware of its common frustration. It demonstrates in support of its claims and attempts protest. The result is an outbreak of violence. This provokes retaliation from the other side, who now begin to form enemy images in their mind. The 'enemy' is believed to pose an inevitable danger of brutal violence and a threat to vital interests. Against a background of mutual violence – terrorist acts, armed operations, ethnic cleansing – criminality intensifies and those in power begin to find themselves paralysed. The greater the escalation of violence, the more difficult it is to avert it, to extinguish the mutual hatred that has overwhelmed all the participants in the conflict; and all the more so as it reinforces itself with accumulating memories of mutual grievances. It is therefore very important to work out a strategy which will help to lessen the tension in confrontations from the beginning, while they have not yet become open battles, and a chance remains of reaching a mutually acceptable compromise.

Searching for Paths to Reconciliation

The problem, then, does not consist in moving from violent confrontation to peaceful compromise, but in steering a conflict which has only just begun along the path to a compromise leading to the reconciliation of all parties. The importance of this enterprise goes without saying, but the same cannot be said for the formulae which have been proposed for the reconciling of opposing parties. It is clear enough that paths to reconciliation rest on the support of moral values. A purely pragmatic approach based on the idea that reconciliation is of practical benefit to both sides has little chance of succeeding. People do not find pragmatic success adequate; what is vitally important for them is to feel that they are right. Reconciliation must therefore rest on moral guidelines which are unconditional for both sides. The difficulty is that in social relationships moral values common to all humanity are often embodied in different social values. The same actions may therefore be considered morally acceptable by one side and thoroughly evil by the other. Moral and pragmatic values become intricately entwined, and it is not easy to bring them into harmony.

This situation leads to an awareness of the need to reexamine in depth everyday ideas of good and evil with the aim of rooting them more deeply in fundamental moral principles that are known to be acceptable independently of their association with one or other social or ethnic group. This is the basis of movements such as

Moral Re-Armament, which sets itself the aim of altering social consciousness along moral lines.⁴ This movement also aims to recommend the use of nonviolent methods of struggle for justice for oppressed minorities or for groups who are victims of the dominant structures in society. The concept of nonviolent resistance goes back to the philosophical and moral teachings of Lev Tolstoy, who proposed the principle of nonviolence as a fundamental moral value.⁵ This teaching had significant influence on Mahatma Gandhi, who led the struggle for justice for Indians in South Africa, and then the movement for the emancipation of India from British rule.

The twentieth century has provided us not only with examples of the most savage mass terror but with real experience of the use of nonviolent methods. One essential concept in nonviolent struggle is that of developing tolerance towards the other side – towards unfamiliar values and religious teachings, and towards the unfamiliar way of life of groups living in close proximity. In the reconciliation of potential opponents an essential role has been played by the concept of dialogue, in which people set out their incompatible points of view and which is the basis of parliamentarianism and other democratic institutions, including the law courts. However, the experience of developing nonviolent methods has shown that dialogue and tolerance are not a panacea in all cases. Attempts by one side to initiate dialogue are often seen by the other as expansionist, as an imposition of their own view of the situation. For example, ecumenism as a movement towards Christian unity in the common task of salvation of society and the resolution of social problems often produces a reaction of extreme suspicion even within the Christian *oikoumene*.

In fact, ecumenical initiatives which are insufficiently thought through deepen the divisions amongst churches and confessions. Moreover, the principle of tolerance must not be looked upon as an absolute, for it can lead to an inability to differentiate and to relativism in the moral and religious sphere. The Christian principle of hatred of sin and love of the sinner is often reduced to tolerance of the sin. It thus gives rise not to love, but to hatred and confrontation.

The principle of nonviolence can itself result in unacceptable concessions to evil in some situations. Il'ya Il'in has undertaken a profound analysis of this problem.⁶ It would take up too much space to repeat his whole analysis here, while a short summary would be an unacceptable simplification of his position. We should note, however, that Il'in is in no way advocating violence. He stresses that violence is never just, but that it is necessary in certain circumstances. He considers an important criterion of the admissibility of violence to be the moral and religious state of the person who accepts this burden as a heavy responsibility in preventing the spread of evil. He sees the danger of violence as a factor which unleashes base instincts. His criticism of nonviolent methods does not consist in a call to violence, but in the understanding that nonviolence cannot be viewed as an absolute value. Meanwhile it is the absolutising of values which are in principle nonabsolute which is one of the basic causes of corruption of the moral nature of man.

Anthropological Catastrophe

Evil appears at the moment basic moral principles are violated. In the religious understanding evil is the result of human sin, a violation of the basic laws of God. According to the traditional Judaeo-Christian religious understanding, the Fall is the conscious violation of God's will, which is explicitly expressed in the Bible as a call to Man: 'O Man! What is good has been explained to you and this is what the Lord asks of you: Act justly, love charity and walk humbly before your God' (Mic. 6:8).

The traditional understanding of the Fall assumes that man violates laws known to him out of ill will, weakness or folly. He may not understand what these laws require of him here and now, at the moment when he is faced with a serious moral choice. However, he knows despite this that an absolute point of reference lies in this morality.

An anthropological catastrophe occurs at the moment when a man, or more exactly a critical mass of mankind, loses its understanding of what sin is and where it is located and proceeds to a position of moral relativism where moral values are changed into pragmatic ones.⁷ In such a situation man loses moral responsibility for the evil which is committed, for the very concept of evil is hopelessly obliterated. For such a person the very concept of atonement as repentance and reconciliation with God is meaningless. For him the moral problem is not how to avoid committing sin, but, having committed it, to correct its consequences. How is the concept of sin to be resurrected in the consciousness of such a person? How is he to be made aware of the fact that sin is a serious matter, that moral law is not just a set of conventions accepted in a given culture or environment?

Christian theology certainly does not regard morality as the exclusive preserve of believers. Every person is capable of intuitive differentiation between good and evil – ‘practical reason’ (in Kant’s terminology) is a human characteristic. ‘Pagans who have never heard of the law but are naturally led to do what the law commands may not possess the law but are the law themselves: they can point to the substance of the law engraved on their hearts, to which their consciences and thoughts bear witness, accusing and defending one another’ (Rom 2: 14–15). With these words the apostle Paul is expressing theological confidence in the moral nature of man as his essence. Here lies a fundamental principle of Christian anthropology: the essence of man is not what he is on an empirical level, but what he is called to become. M. K. Mamardashvili⁸ has shown that man often finds himself in situations where it is ‘too late’, where irreversible events have taken place which cannot be put right on an empirical level. In this context he introduces the concept of anthropological catastrophe – the mass destruction of human awareness under the power of total ideologisation or extreme individualism. Anthropological catastrophe manifests itself in the loss of the ability to perceive others adequately, including representatives of social groups with which we are in contact. In this way the mechanisms of peaceful resolution of conflict are destroyed and tolerance of others is realised only in the form of indifference towards their interests.

Anthropological catastrophe brings ‘Faustian man’ to the forefront, for whom action, not word, has priority – activity acquires self-supporting value and is separated from the sphere of the word. A situation of speechlessness arises in which authentic communication, the possibility of common discussion aimed at resolving conflicts, is severely degraded. In a situation of speechlessness the mechanisms for talking through problems and situations of conflict together are absent. In such a situation there is no way of achieving timely restraint from action, and the principle that prevails is ‘first get involved in the fight, and then see what happens’.

Overcoming anthropological catastrophe is not possible by direct action, even if this action is verbal (attempts at dialogue, calls for reconciliation and tolerance and so on). If words have priority then words themselves must become the subject of thought, that is, of reflection and imagination, which permits awareness of how these words are received in another consciousness. Actions directed at reconciliation within a divided society can lead to a positive result only if they are based on a desire and ability to understand the other person – on the moral imperative of mutual under-

standing. However, this means a fundamental restructuring of the mind (Greek: *metanoia*), aimed at overcoming the anthropological catastrophe. In the language of Christian theology anthropological catastrophe is understood in terms of a radical fall away from God, that is, not just the Fall (choosing evil), but also the loss of reference points for good and evil. Faustian man, regarding action as of paramount importance, has lost the Word-Logos as a basic reference point. For him thought is primarily an instrument which ensures the effectiveness of practical activity. As a result of the fall (*exitus*) that has taken place, human life is a path (*via*) along which every step is a choice: either to accept the assistance of grace, having responded to it with love, or to disregard this assistance and intensify the fall. The former choice involves a person trying to build his life from the perspective of reunion with God (*reditus*), the latter involves a rejection of this perspective.

Love and Mutual Understanding

In theological understanding love is not an emotion but a particular state of the soul, the highest of the so-called 'theological virtues' (See 1 Cor. 13: 1–7). If love were only a pleasant emotion then all calls to love would be useless. Emotion cannot be summoned up to order. It is unnatural to experience pleasant emotions for someone who is clearly doing evil; and the world is full of evil and evildoers. Those who represent groups competing in the struggle for vitally important interests are naturally perceived as sources of evil (of potential violence) and do not arouse pleasant emotions. The premise that love is an emotion would make the fundamental commandment of Jesus Christ senseless: 'This is my commandment – love one another as I have loved you' (John 15: 12, c.f. John 13: 34–35). The solution of this paradox lies in the fact that love is not an uncontrollable emotion, nor an instinctive response to goodness (which ceases on contact with evil), but a particular concentration of the mind and will which produces in a person the desire and capability to understand another,⁹ even if this other is a dangerous evildoer. If the essential nature of love is understood in this way the commandment to love our enemies becomes not only feasible, but in practice unavoidable.

The commandment to love becomes a categorical imperative¹⁰ for mutual understanding, that is, a fundamental moral law which has a basis not only in theology but also in human reason. Tolerance which is based on the desire for mutual understanding cannot turn into a relativistic tolerance of (indifference to) evil, for understanding another reveals in him the source of the evil and sin which must be resisted. The desire to understand the other person prevents dialogue turning into an effort to force your own views on him. Understanding one another is a condition for fruitful dialogue. It means understanding the limits of the person's actions, and the conditions in which force is to be applied to the extent to which the other person will be able to understand it as a necessity and not as being exercised with the aim of oppressing him.

Let me break off at this point. I have by no means exhausted the ways in which these ideas could be developed, but no one person on his own would be able to do so. They need to be developed in dialogue and concrete realisation in those situations which life constantly presents us with. Mutual understanding has as its initial precondition an interest in other people, which promotes attention to their concerns and problems. Developing in oneself this kind of interest in other individuals might well be the first stage. There can be no universally applicable recipes here. What is possible is simply to call for dialogue and tolerance on the basis of love and mutual

understanding.

When there is the threat of any confrontation within society it is very important to understand the difference between the 'black zone' which initiates dangerous conflicts and the 'grey zone' which is forcibly made part of the conflict by the situation of confrontation itself. The desire to understand the true interests at stake in this zone would allow tension between groups to be significantly reduced and lead to the resolution through compromise of situations of imminent conflict.

Everything I have said reflects my conviction that the imperative of mutual understanding is the basis on which it is possible to conduct timely dialogue and take ecumenical initiatives which are not to be perceived as unjustified expansion. Mutual understanding is also a necessary basis for nonviolent action and for defining those circumstances in which Il'in's thesis applies – the thesis that violence, while never just, is sometimes necessary. And, finally, this imperative prevents appropriate tolerance turning into indifference towards evil.

Notes and References

- ¹ Work for this article was carried out with support from the 'Rossiisky fond fundamental'nykh issledovaniy', Project no. 96-06-80625.
- ² N. L. Muskhelishvili, V. M. Sergeev and Yu. A. Shreider, 'Tsennostnaya refleksiya i konflikty v razdelenom obshchestve', *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 11, 1996, pp. 3–22.
- ³ R. G. Apresyan (ed.), *Opyt nenasiliya v XX stoletii (sotsial'no-eticheskiye ocherki)* (ASLAN, Moscow, 1996).
- ⁴ K. D. Belden, *Meeting Moral Re-Armament* (T. W. Pegg, London, 1979).
- ⁵ Gi de Mallak (Gui de Mallac), *Mudrost' L'va Tolstogo* (ASLAN, Moscow, 1995).
- ⁶ I. A. Il'in, *O soprotivlenii zlu siloyu* (2 vols.) (Moscow, 1993), vol. 1, pp. 301–479.
- ⁷ Yu. A. Shreider, *Lektsii po etike* (MIROS, Moscow, 1994).
- ⁸ M. K. Mamardashvili, *Soznaniye i tsivilizatsiya: chelovek v sisteme nauk* (Moscow, 1989), pp. 317–31.
- ⁹ Yu. A. Shreider, 'Lyubov'', in the newspaper *Svet Yevangeliya* (Moscow, 1996), no. 30, p. 6.
- ¹⁰ According to Kant a 'categorical imperative' is a requirement made of a human being which must be fulfilled whatever the situation.

(Translated from the Russian by Geraldine Fagan)