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## Chaadayev as Russia's First Philosopher

The title of this paper might suggest that it is intended to describe Chaadayev's philosophy. This is not so. An attempt will be made, rather, to argue the following points: first, that Chaadayev is chronologically the first philosopher of Russia because earlier persons to whom that distinction has been attributed do not really deserve it; second, that, unlike these so-called predecessors, Chaadayev in his writings provides a body of material which qualifies as a philosophy and which is presented as such; and third, that his philosophy is distinctively Russian, even though Chaadayev combines many Western philosophical characteristics with his native Russian outlook. In brief, I want to show that Chaadayev may legitimately be called a philosopher, that his philosophy is specifically Russian in character, and that he is the first in Russian intellectual history to produce such a characteristically Russian philosophy.

Before arguing the point it is essential to clarify two major terms: What do I mean by a "philosophy" and hence a "philosopher," and what is a "*Russian*" philosophy or philosopher as distinguished from a Western, Indian, or Chinese one? As to the first, it is necessary at the outset to eliminate what I do *not* mean. I do not mean the popular term according to which any given set of values or any outlook is a philosophy, and every man who thinks rationally is a philosopher. I do not mean, that is, the "philosophy" of Watergate or the "philosophy" of the Walton family. If this sense were included in my meaning of "philosophy," this paper would be refuted at once by the mere fact that Chaadayev was not chronologically the first rational Russian. Philosophy, as I am concerned with it here, is a systematically presented and argued critical analysis of the nature of some fundamental aspect of reality or of our knowledge of it. *A* philosophy is even more: it is such a critical analysis and systematic presentation of all major aspects of reality. In these senses, "philosophy" and "*a* philosophy" are distinguished from ideology and ideologies—which require no argument or support—and from partial disciplines which imply a philosophy in their presuppositions but do not present a system or argue these presuppositions.

Russian philosophy, without here surveying all Russian philosophical views for common characteristics that do not appear—or are not common—in Western philosophies, uniquely combines the following traits: (1) a basic, primary ontological intuition which grounds a theory of knowledge; (2) the introduction of a special faculty which directly intuits reality and makes the primary ontological intuition possible; (3) an Orthodox Christian historical orientation; and (4) a search for *total* unity. (For a discussion of accepted Western forms of philosophy, as compared with the Russian, see Appendix 1.) Not all these characteristics appear in the works of every Russian philosopher and each—with the exception of the third—can and does appear in the works of some Western philosophers; nevertheless, these traits do distinguish Russian philosophy in general and are as characteristic of it as being human, under thirty, chronically tired, and ill-fed are characteristic of an American college student.

If these views of "philosophy" and "Russian philosophy" are adopted, Chaadayev's major rivals for the title of Russia's first philosopher can be eliminated. Although the title has been attributed to Skovoroda, his Latin training in the Ukraine is of such influence that it is difficult to call his views Russian at all—except, of course, in terms of the political affiliation of his place of birth at the time of his birth. The title has also been attributed to Radishchev. But Radishchev's work, with the exception of his remarkable essay, "Man, His Mortality and His Immortality," consists of social theory, and thus is too limited to be called "a philosophy" and does not allow him the classification of "philosopher"; furthermore, his outlook lacks two of the major characteristics of Russian philosophy mentioned above: historical orientation and concern for unity; and, finally, none of the content of his work is more distinctively Russian than that of Skovoroda.

Chaadayev, on the other hand, provides a coherent presentation of a complete system,<sup>1</sup> and both the presentation and the content of this system are unlike their counterparts in Western philosophy, whereas they unite the major characteristics of the philosophical work which was produced after him in Russia. In form, a Western philosopher of Chaadayev's day would have started with a discussion of method and would then have presented a theory of knowledge on which the view he was about to expound was grounded. Although Chaadayev in fact does this in his *First Philosophical Letter*, the presentation, both in form and content, differs radically from, say, that of Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* or of Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The first *Letter* describes nineteenth-century Russian intellectual and social life and evaluates both aspects unfavorably in comparison to the West. The West, Chaadayev contends, has followed the true and morally right path. This path is true and morally right because it is the path that Christianity demands, that of growth in union of mankind through the brotherhood of men and nations and the passing on and developing of Christian tradition. Thus, the path is that of Christian history, as provided for by God at the beginning of history, and it leads to the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. This is contrasted with Russia's isolation in all aspects of life and with the consequent nomadic and aimless life of the Russian people.<sup>2</sup>

Chaadayev establishes that the Christian, Western development is the true and right one by means of two principles which he accepts as intuited truth. The first principle, *Adveniat regnum tuum*, heads the first *Letter* (as well as the *Apology of a Madman*): the goal of history is the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. The second principle is the prayer from the Gospel of John (17:11): "Holy Father, I pray that they may be one, as we also are."<sup>3</sup> Thus the principle of growth in unity is stated and presented here as a

1. See Mary-Barbara Zeldin, "The Influence of Immanuel Kant on Peter Yakovlevich Chaadayev," to be published in *Studies in Soviet Thought*, May 1978.

2. This hardly resembles the approach which leads Descartes to discover the *Cogito* and the reliability of clear and distinct ideas; nor, surely, can it be said to be similar to that of Kant in the first *Critique*!

3. See *Peter Yakovlevich Chaadayev: Philosophical Letters and Apology of a Madman*, trans. and with an intro. by Mary-Barbara Zeldin (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970), p. 32. These two optative basic principles of the nature of reality contrast strikingly with the categorical statements of Western philosophers. Descartes concludes,

sacred force which determines the nature of reality, of truth, and of moral value, and which governs the course of history; it is also a duty for men. In these principles, Chaadayev provides statements of the end and of the means to it. That these are the end and the means is then verified from experience: history does in fact tend to greater unity and where there is union there is progress in all aspects of life; furthermore, only in terms of these principles does history make sense or life have meaning.

Thus, in the first *Letter*, Chaadayev follows Western tradition in presenting a method and a theory of knowledge, but not in the accepted Western forms, such as systematic doubt until the indubitable is attained or an analysis of the nature and powers of human reason. The principles are not derived from sensation; they are intuited, but not by reason. Instead, they are intuited by a special cognitive faculty which is the potential possession of all men and which is active in any morally proper being. The addition of this special morally-based cognitive faculty to those of sensation and thought, which are recognized in the West, is distinctive of Russian philosophy: it is found in Kireevskii, Solov'ev, and Pisarev, and today it is possessed by any unconfused Russian Marxist.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this faculty expresses itself not in quantitative-spatial terms, but in temporal terms, and its concern is not primarily physical nature but human history as having a divine source.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of the principles intuited by this special faculty, Chaadayev goes on to elaborate a view of the nature of reality—a metaphysics, an ethics, and a philosophy of history—in the subsequent *Philosophical Letters*. The view is history-oriented, Christian, and obviously influenced by Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup> In all these characteristics it is clearly distinguished from the Western philosophy of Chaadayev's day: few Western philosophies of the early nineteenth century could seriously be said to be Christian, certainly not in a traditional sense, and none could be called Orthodox. The only historically concerned Western philosopher at the time was Hegel, whom Chaadayev did not know well and did not like. Hegel's dialectic of history is radically distinct from Chaadayev's view of continuous progress to ever greater unity, and Hegel's total unity is a unity of mind as reason, not a total "great Apocalyptic synthesis" (*Letter VIII*).<sup>7</sup>

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after pure theoretical investigation, that he is and is a thinking substance, thus leading to the further conclusion that reality is basically substantive and that it has a mental aspect; Kant concludes, after theoretical investigation, that reality is unknowable in itself and known only with the additional contribution of our own mental activity (*Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith [London, 1929; second impression with corrections, 1933], p. 148: "The understanding . . . is itself the lawgiver of nature . . ."). In neither case, so far as knowledge proper is concerned, is there an appeal to the optative, to what *ought to be*.

4. See Appendix 1.

5. See Appendix 1. It should be observed here that for the Russian Marxist reality itself may be said to be divine (see Mary-Barbara Zeldin, "The Religious Nature of Russian Marxism," *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 7, no. 3 [Fall 1969]: 207–15), but it does not, as in the other case, have a divine source aside from itself; to think in terms of a source beyond reality is a complete denial of the principles of dialectical materialism.

6. See p. 476 and Appendix 2.

7. See *Peter Yakovlevich Chaadayev*, p. 160. There is no evidence of Chaadayev's having any of Hegel's work in his three thousand-volume library (nor even in his first library, which he sold to his cousin in 1821). The second library did include, however, an 1835 French translation of Willm's book on Hegelian philosophy and a copy of Marheineke's book on

The search for unity in Chaadayev is not, of course, a strictly Russian characteristic—this kind of search is characteristic of all rationality: even the most radical pluralists favor order over chaos. But Chaadayev's demand is Russian in kind and in degree. The unity sought is organic and must be all-embracing. From Chaadayev at the beginning of the nineteenth century to Solov'ev at its end, *total* unity is the Russian metaphysical ideal: there cannot be two realms, one physical and one mental, but somehow these must be fused; there cannot be two kinds of being, one infinite and one finite, but somehow the divine and the created must interpenetrate; there cannot even be divisions of time and space, the unity must be universal, taking in all generations and all nations. The most striking instance of this view is Fedorov's notion of the physical resurrection of our ancestors. In Chaadayev the view is expressed in his twice-repeated misquotation from Pascal: "the whole succession of men is but one man who abides always" (*Letter VII*).<sup>8</sup> The unity is not pantheistic, but organic,<sup>9</sup> resembling a system governed by a set of primitive propositions. In this unity personality is retained, yet every person affects his neighbor just as every moving body affects the one with which it collides. For Chaadayev the focus of such unity is found in Christianity and in Christianity's historical center—the Incarnation, life, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ—as well as in the repetition of this event in the celebration of the Eucharist, the union of the physical and spiritual, of man and God. The roots of Chaadayev's view lie not only in Christianity but also in the traditional Orthodox demand for unanimity of dogma and in the notion of *sobornost'*, which was later developed by Khomiakov. (See Appendix 2 for an elaboration of the influence of Russian

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Hegel. R. T. McNally, in *Chaadayev and his Friends* (Tallahassee, 1972), pp. 191–93, argues against Falk (Heinrich Falk, *Das Weltbild Peter J. Tschaadajews nach seinen acht "Philosophischen Briefen"* [Munich, 1954]) that Chaadayev knew Hegel's views well though only at second hand and that he was strongly opposed to these views. It is difficult to see how this could be the case if he knew only versions of Hegelianism as presented by interpreters. McNally finds Chaadayev's opposition to Hegel, as expressed in his letter to Schelling (see M. O. Gershenzon, *Sochineniia i pis'ma P. Ia. Chaadaeva* [Moscow, 1913–14], vol. 1, p. 246), particularly strong. I do not, especially considering Chaadayev's usual style. It is, rather, an expression of a popular philosophical attitude with little philosophical content. Whether or not Chaadayev knew Hegel after 1836 and whether he was then opposed to the German philosopher is not relevant to a discussion of the *Letters*, since all of them were composed several years earlier at a time when no Russian was particularly acquainted with Hegel (see Falk, *Das Weltbild Peter J. Tschaadajews*, p. 122). Historical orientation at that time was much more likely to have come from Herder, if it came from any Western source; Chaadayev owned a copy of Herder's *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* which he apparently acquired prior to writing the *Letters*.

8. *Peter Yakovlevich Chaadayev*, p. 135; cf. *Letter V*, *ibid.*, p. 95.

9. To be sure, the idea of organic unity is to be found in Schelling, and Chaadayev was certainly fond of Schelling. He could just as well, however, have found it in Kant, notably in the *Critique of Judgment*. Insofar as personality is retained in the unity Chaadayev has in mind, Kant is the more likely candidate. There is no reason to suppose that Kant influenced Chaadayev here, however, since there is no indication that Chaadayev even knew of the existence of the third *Critique*. The idea could just as easily have native roots. On the other hand, it should be noted that Chaadayev says, in the fifth *Letter*: "It is to the direction [Kant] gave to philosophy that we owe all the sound ideas there are in the world today, and even I myself am but a logical consequence of his ideas" (*Peter Yakovlevich Chaadayev*, pp. 103–4; italics added).

Orthodoxy on this idea.) To make the unity total, there must also be union of theory and practice—of logical validity and fact on the one hand, and of the moral, social realization of what ought to be on the other. This notion is developed by Chaadayev's successors and finds its clearest expression in Mikhailovskii's essay on *pravda* (truth-justice).<sup>10</sup> Its origin goes back to the beginnings of Slavic languages and it is still present today in the Russian Marxist principle of the union of theory and practice. On the other hand, the notion is a *bête noire* for Western philosophers: how to go from fact to value.

Thus, in the *Philosophical Letters*, Chaadayev presents a complete systematic philosophy: epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of history, anthropology. The nature of reality is that of a growth to total unity in and through history (divinely originated and governed), by means of the evergrowing brotherhood of men. What is divisive is morally wrong, and isolation leads not only to moral depravity but to mental confusion—to logical as well as moral falsehood. Chaadayev demonstrates and supports this view, derived from original intuited principles, by argument and evidence in the later *Letters*, which are concerned with the nature of knowledge, with the parallelism of the physical and mental realms and their ultimate unity, and with the nature of history as leading to the establishment of the kingdom of God. Although influenced by Western views and methods, Chaadayev's philosophy is distinct from Western philosophy and has the characteristics which have distinguished Russian philosophy as uniquely Russian from his day to the present. His concern is with man in history; man progressing under divine guidance to total integration of matter and spirit, of finite and infinite, of fact and value; man progressing to an end in which the moral ideal is realized in actual fact. It is in these terms that Chaadayev may legitimately be said to be Russia's first philosopher.

10. Preface to *Sochineniia N. K. Mikhailovskogo*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1896), pp. v-vi.

## APPENDIX 1

(1) Western philosophy, at least since Descartes, begins with a presentation of a method and with an epistemology. A justification of *how* I know what I claim to know about reality is expected of me before I state *what* I claim to know about it. The Western approach, resulting in part from philosophy's emancipation from her role as theological handmaiden and in a consequent triumph over the fallacy of the *argumentum ad vericundiam*, also leads to a vicious circle (How do I justify the method and epistemology which justify my metaphysics?), a problem which is not relevant to this discussion. In general, unlike philosophers in the West, Russian philosophers, from Chaadayev to Lenin and his successors, *first* have an intuition of reality as it really is and *only then*, if ever, develop a method and a theory of knowledge to justify it, appealing to basic principles of the intuited reality—Scripture, history, science, as the case may be. (Not surprisingly, we again find ourselves in a circle.) Thus Chaadayev's theory of knowledge is dependent on his two basic principles (see p. 474); Solov'ev tells us that man has a direct intuition of external reality and of God

as absolute reality (see Solov'ev's *Lectures on Godmanhood*, trans. Peter Zouboff [London, 1948], pp. 90–91, 326; as well as his *Critique of Abstract Principles* [V. S. Solov'ev, *Sochineniia*, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg, 1911), pp. 306 and 308]); Lenin's metaphysical position on the material nature of reality determined by the three laws of the dialectic is first accepted and then used to show that Ernst Mach and Bogdanov are wrong (see Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* [New York, 1927], *passim*).

(2) The introduction of a special faculty, neither reason nor sense, is rare in modern Western philosophy. St. Augustine's "*credo ut intellegam*" and St. Anselm's "*fides quarens intellectum*" suggest a cognitive faculty of faith which is dropped as philosophy becomes secular in the Renaissance and thereafter. A special faculty was indeed introduced in the eighteenth century by British philosophers in ethics—Hutcheson's and Shaftsbury's moral sense, Butler's conscience—but this moral faculty provides only *moral* cognition, not theoretical or metaphysical knowledge. On the other hand, Russians, in general, posit a faculty—called "integral reason," "free willing reason," "reason in its wholeness" by Khomiakov; "intuition," "faith," "mystical knowledge," "mystical perception," "immediate experience," "direct perception," by Solov'ev; "spiritual experience," by Berdiaev—which directly intuits the thing-in-itself. In most cases this faculty works accurately only if a man is in a *morally* good state (see p. 475, and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, "The Influence of Immanuel Kant on Peter Yakovlevich Chaadayev").

(3) The major Western philosophers among Chaadayev's seventeenth and eighteenth-century predecessors or his nineteenth-century contemporaries were—with the exception of Spinoza—Christians, but their Christianity was hardly traditional and their interpretation of reality was also not a traditional one (and, of course, not a Russian Orthodox one). It is hard to find, say, the contents of the Nicene Creed in the philosophies of Kant, Fichte, or even Bishop Berkeley. Hegel's "Triad" is criticized by Solov'ev for just such reasons (see pp. 475, 476, and Appendix 2).

(4) Among Russians, the demand for unity is striking. To be sure, it is to be found in the West as well, at least since Thales. Russians, however, seek a unity which is neither pantheistic nor even monistic. Man is a *person*, not a mere appearance of the Absolute. (It is questionable whether Solov'ev, whose philosophical system is the most elaborate and all-embracing of the major Russian philosophers' systems, succeeds in avoiding pantheism [see, for example, his *Lectures on Godmanhood*, lecture 8], but it is certain that he *thought* he did.) The unity demanded is also not, as in a static monism, a unity of reality *now*, but of reality both now and *in the future, to be achieved in time*. The emphasis is historical, not spatial. Time, as the action of men, is part of reality. This is why Fedorov argues that technology can, quite literally, resurrect our ancestors. To be sure, the view toward unity varies. Kireevskii's basic concern with unity is with that of the human soul and its proper (morally correct) integration; Khomiakov goes further, to the organic unity of all men—*sobornost'*—a brotherhood of God's creatures; Pisarev finds as an ideal a proper integration within the individual human psyche; Solov'ev seeks a total unity of all creation, of man in all aspects and activities and even of matter itself, in a transfigured world to be achieved on earth; and Russian Marxist philosophers, following Hegel, find unity in historical development, in the unitary content of reality, in the

organization of the sciences, in the union of theory and practice. In this last case, however, one might question to what extent the individual person survives. Moreover, the unity is in fact not organic at all but purely monistic: reality consists of matter in motion and the motion takes place in accordance with the three laws inherent in matter.

## APPENDIX 2

The tradition of *theosis* (deification) is Eastern and is central to Eastern Orthodoxy. This doctrine of union with God, based on the dogma of the Incarnation, avoids the pitfalls of Neoplatonic transcendent mysticism and apophatic theology: God is unknowable, but he made himself known as a living God and as man. Just as God participates in man through Jesus Christ, so man, through the fact of the Incarnation—and so the life, the death, and the Resurrection—can participate in God. This participation is most forcefully expressed and made possible in the sacrament of Communion. Here an individual as a *person* participates with God: the individual retains his individuality; God remains transcendent as well as incarnate. Man does not simply reach out to an unknowable absolute: he absorbs this unknown absolute *into himself*. And this participation is available to every believer. This is the response of the Eastern Orthodox tradition to Western Neoplatonic mysticism on the one hand and to Aristotelian intellectualism on the other (see John Meyendorff, *St. Grégoire Palamas et la mystique orthodoxe* [Paris, 1959; rev. ed., 1975]). As a result, as Chaadayev says in *Letter VIII*, the Word is not a static set of sayings written down in a book, it is Christ's whole being, divine and human, his physical suffering and the Transfiguration, to each and for each, "always fed upon and never consumed"; and when Jesus Christ said he would be with men, he meant *in* men and *in* history. History is therefore to be read as Christian history. The prayer for the brotherhood of men, "that they may be one as we also are" (John 17:11) is an ideal goal which is really possible. For Chaadayev this goal is to be achieved at the level of a single unity of time which unites the generations of men (see his quotation, or misquotation, from Pascal on p. 476) through the unity of individuals in nations and the uniting of these nations. The traditional Christian view of the Episcopate, which establishes the continued presence of God in his creation, is given, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, a second, personalistic grounding in this doctrine of *theosis* which allows for deviations by "enlightened individuals" (*Letter VI* and *Letter VII*) from a tradition which might otherwise become static. Thus this doctrine allows for progress toward the goal of the final brotherhood of men in a transfigured world that is the Church realized. Here we find traditional Eastern Orthodoxy, as it developed from the early Eastern Fathers through the thought of the monks of Mt. Athos and the work of St. Gregory Palamas, providing the germs both for the Russian idea of *sobornost'* (which was elaborated in Russia as a theological idea by Khomiakov) and for the Russian conceptual elaboration of the idea of *pravda* (see p. 476 and p. 477, n. 10).

The unity longed for and sought in Russian philosophy has its spiritual origin in Russian Orthodoxy's Eastern source. Its intent is the Christian notion of the Church. The Church preserves divine transcendence, preserves human personalities, makes direct communion with God possible to every man through

the sacrament of the Eucharist which itself is made possible through the continuity of the Episcopate. Finally, the Church harmonizes these personalities into a kingdom. But the Orthodoxy is also Russian and involves ideas which are either wholly Russian or have become wholly assimilated. Thus, in Chaadayev the role of nations in the historical progress to the goal of the Church realized on earth is an elaboration of the idea of Holy Moscow; the continuity of Providence's role in history by the handing down of tradition through enlightened individuals is his interpretation of the Russian notion of the divinely anointed king. We have here three stages: the Eastern church fathers, the basic Russian ideas of Holy Moscow and the Holy Tsar, and Chaadayev's philosophical elaboration.