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Guest Editor's Introduction

This article presents the central paradigms of the understanding of love by early twentieth-century Russian philosophers. It shows that interpreting the meaning of erotic love as a way of overcoming death, as proposed by Vladimir Solovyov, largely determined not only the metaphysical inquiries, but also the personal life strategies of those who contributed to Russian Silver-Age culture. The author argues that familiarity with the autobiographies of philosophers and their lives is important for better understanding of the Russian philosophical tradition and appreciation of how this tradition was shaped by love-as-suffering, love-as-service, and love-as-friendship.

Keywords: *metaphysics of love, Russian religious renaissance, eros, family, marriage blanc, philosophical fellowship, death, syzygy, creative self-determination, history of ideas*

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We all love the same way as we understand the world. Each man's history of love is a precise cast made from the history of his relationships to the world as such.¹

—Fyodor Sologub

An era of unity between high culture and everyday life

Anyone interested in the Russian philosophical tradition at the turn of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can see that love represents one of the central and most significant topics in the works of that era's philosophers. However, if one were to compile an anthology of philosophical works devoted specifically to analyzing such phenomena as love, *eros*, gender, and marriage, that list of texts would prove less than impressive. How is this possible?

The unique feature of early twentieth-century Russian philosophy consists in its attempts to combine philosophical maxims with everyday life, to embody patterns of thought in daily living activity, to fuse high culture with the quotidian. The key to understanding the philosophy of love of Russian Silver-Age cultural figures lies in researching their personal peripeteias through the works directly related to them, and in identifying the philosophical context of their actions and fateful decisions. Especially important are the testimonies of those thinkers whose work was illuminated by mutual love, whose texts originated in the course of a living experiment marked by existential openness and love between partners and among colleagues in their professional workshop, among those who expressed their insights, doubts, mystical revelations, and suffering in the form of artistic or scholarly texts. Their legacy is evidence of how philosophical concepts are generated by an affinity of souls, how new ideas and paradigms crystallize from the intertwining of personal and creative destinies. Their academic publications, epistolary legacy, personal notes, memoirs, and diary entries are equally important for reconstructing their philosophy of love as an individual, existential experience.

In the early twentieth century, there were quite a few "philosophical couples" who proclaimed that love, as a kind of kinship in life and values, was the meaning of existence. By this I mean respectable academic families, fleeting amorous fellowships, "Symbolist unions," spiritual marriages, and tripartite unities (*ménage à trois*). Among the legendary lovers who created their own mythology of love, I would include the unions of Vyacheslav Ivanov and Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal, Zinaida Gippius and Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Evgenii Trubetskoi and Margarita Morozova,

Fyodor Sologub and Anastasiia Chebotarevskaia, Aleksandr Blok and Liubov' Blok (Mendeleeva), Lev Shestov and Varvara Malakhieva-Mirovich, Fyodor Stepun and Anna Obolenskaia, Aleksei Losev and Valentina Loseva (Sokolova), Sergei Bulgakov and Yulia Reitlinger, and Lev Karsavin and Elena Skrzhinskaia, among others. One feature unites their destinies: the happiness of love experienced under circumstances otherwise incompatible with happiness. These gifted people were sentenced to suffering and separation by their own era. The first half of the twentieth century was marked by the bloody chaos of socialist revolution, a civil war, two world wars, and Stalinist terror. For many who survived these terrible times, salvation was tied to compulsory immigration, an excommunication from their roots and loved ones. However, in all the histories of love presented in this issue of the journal, broken lives were overcome by collaborative creative work, by the joy of communion with a spiritually close one, by the discovery of life's meaning in passionate service to their chosen partners and to their own vocation.

Vladimir Solovyov's paradigm of philosophy of love

There could be identified two poles of thought about love in early twentieth-century Russian texts: one that gravitates toward the rational-moral side of psychological (psychic) life, and another that reveals its affective, sensory, impulsive side.

The first attempt at a phenomenology of love in Russian philosophy was offered by Father Pavel Florensky. In the eleventh letter ("Friendship") of his major work, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth. An Essay on Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, Florensky conducts a detailed philosophical and linguistic analysis of four Greek terms that convey the shades of love's various forms: ἐρᾶν (*eros*), φιλεῖν (*philia*), στέργειν (*storge*), and ἀγαπᾶν (*agape*). Florensky only casually touched on the erotic component of love, focusing instead on *philia* and *agape*. Love-as-passion remained outside his attention. The focus of Florensky's research, "the highest point on earth and the bridge to heaven," is *philia*'s love-as-camaraderie, which unites two friends as brothers, and *agape*'s similarly chaste love-as-esteem. The philosopher identifies those aspects of love that fall under *philia* and *agape*, seeing them as the substantive aspects of the life of the church, "fraternity and friendship."²

Florensky's metaphysical approach contrasts with Vasily Rozanov's existential method of highlighting philosophical issues. Rozanov, who had a masterful ability to transform his intimate life into text, was as

naked and direct as possible in his revelations about sensual desire and issues related to marriage, family, and sex. However, his philosophical emanations of love remained marginal.

The most frequently invoked paradigm of philosophy of love in early twentieth-century Russia was first provided in the later writings of V.I. Solovyov. *The Meaning of Love*, his celebrated five-part essay published in installments of *Issues of Philosophy and Psychology* in 1892–93, constitutes the philosopher's own credo of love. It was this work that determined the Russian intellectual elite's vector of inquiries into the meaning of life and served as their polestar for understanding the meaning of love during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Solovyov wrote much about love during the last decade of his life. His main thesis consists in the statement that we find in love the possibility of overcoming death. For Solovyov, erotic love is the key to a rebirth of "empirical personhood," the way for man to overcome his flawed, egoistical nature, and a condition for moving past the boundaries of self-contained individualism toward true, holistic being, toward God.

Solovyov saw the task of love as maximizing the lovers' potential, merging the lover and the beloved into a single whole on the path to overcoming the present being: "While recognizing the entirely great importance and elevated dignity of other forms of love, with which false spiritualism and impotent moralism would replace sexual love, we see, however, that only the latter satisfies the basic requirements that make possible the decisive abolition of the self in full, living communion with another."³ Of all the types of love, Solovyov prioritized love between man and woman, considering sexual love to be the most complete and absorbing, surpassing even maternal love and friendship, as well as love for the arts and sciences, or love for the Motherland and humanity.

The philosopher saw in erotic love not a pledge of personal salvation, but the realm of the divine, asserting that it was Eros who was to transform the path of Godmanhood. For Solovyov, sexual love is a living testament to man's ontological principle, for it is in love that we intuitively comprehend the need for recreating the wholeness of the human being: "the separation between the masculine and feminine elements of the human being is already in itself a state of disintegration and the origin of death. To be sexually separate means to be on the path to death."⁴ What did the philosopher see as the true realization of sexual reunification?

Solovyov considered religious faith the only possible basis for unity of the sexes. On the other hand, the union of marriage was in his opinion nowhere near the apotheosis of erotic love. Marriage, the philosopher

believed, cannot rescue people from loneliness, leaving man instead in the same indeterminate state that leads to further disintegration of the human being, that is, to death. Matrimony represents only an external, material uniting of the sexes, wrapped in “a paired egoism, and later a tripled one.” The meaning of love can be found on the path of sacrificing one’s own egoism. Solovyov considered egoism, man’s reckless love for himself, as the source of people’s hatred toward one another, as the cause of discord and bloodshed. The philosopher saw the basic lie of egoism in the inclination among many people to attribute value to their own personhood, to deny dignity and meaning to that of others, and, in recognizing themselves as the sole center of the all Creation, to relegate others to the circumference of their own being, assigning them only a relative value. We can see that the philosopher’s skepticism toward marriage was determined not only by ethical grounds, but by metaphysical grounds, as well.

Solovyov argued that love can be viewed as a pledge, moreover, as a real opportunity for overcoming death, insofar as, for each of us, love brings our awareness of death’s inevitability into conflict with the triumphant affirmation of a life rooted in true love. As Solovyov directed his followers, “If nature, in the processes of biology, seeks increasingly to limit the law of death, then should not man completely repeal this law in the processes of history?”⁵ His formulation, “Love is the spiritual-physical process of restoring the image of the Divine in material humanity,”⁶ largely defined the life goals and intellectual inquiries of his followers.

The absolute calling of love, Solovyov thought, is revealed in being an individual human life rather than a member of a genus. Rejecting the usual thesis that the goal of love is family happiness and childbearing, and dismissing the mutual love embodied in the birth of offspring as “barren,” Solovyov considered passionate love’s coincidence with the appearance of offspring as mere happenstance: “The initial power of love loses all its meaning here, where, from its heights as the undoubted center of immortalized individuality, the object of love is reduced to the level of a random and easily replaceable means for creating a new generation of people, a generation that is perhaps a bit better, perhaps a bit worse, but in any case, is relative and transient.”⁷

In declaring the goal of love to be victory over death and resurrection of the dead, Solovyov, a Platonist and expert in German mysticism, clearly meant more than just the restoration of the etheric body and spiritual rebirth. For Solovyov, rejection of the flesh meant false spirituality, while the philosopher considered the rebirth, salvation, and resurrection

of the mortal and the transitory as true spirituality. We know that during the last period of his life he treated the idea of bodily resurrection sympathetically, an idea preached by his older contemporary Nikolai Fedorov in a philosophy of common cause. In one of Solovyov's last works, "The Life-Drama of Plato," published in volumes 3–4 of *Vestnik Evropy* in 1898, the philosopher wrote:

Love as erotic pathos, no matter whether it is pointed in the highest or lowest direction, looks nothing like love for God, like philanthropy, like love toward one's parents and homeland, or toward brothers and friends. It is certainly a love of corporeity, so the only question is: for what purpose? To what does love aspire with respect to corporeity: to repeat in it endlessly the same elemental facts of emergence and disappearance, the same hellish victory of ugliness, death, and decay, or to impart to the corporeal that real life is in beauty, immortality, and incorruption?⁸

What precisely did Solovyov expect of his contemporaries when he proclaimed, in the spirit of Nietzsche's prophecy of the Overman, that the full realization of love between man and woman had not yet taken place in history?

For Solovyov, sexual love is a project of Godmanhood, the vector of history, the task and goal of humanity:

The task of love consists in defending in practice the meaning of love first given only in feeling; it requires the kind of combination of two given, limited beings that would create one absolute, ideal person. This task ... is given directly by our spiritual nature, whose uniqueness lies precisely in the fact that man can become an absolute person while remaining himself; he can contain the absolute content in his own form.⁹

When discussing absolute personhood, Solovyov had in mind an ideal that does not exist in empirical reality, but a personhood endowed with an eternal life in which the human form is restored in its totality (integrated). Man as such is doomed to dust, since he exists only in his sexual one-sidedness and limitation, as a male or female individual.

Like a sphinx, the philosopher poses this task for mankind: to realize in history the kind of ideal human person who would be not just a man or just a woman but a supreme unity of the two, both of which retain their formal isolation while overcoming their substantive discord. Olga Matich has written a fascinating study about the ways Silver-Age Russia tried to solve Solovyov's love problem: *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination*.¹⁰

Solovyov penned a concentrated summary of his years-long reflections on the meaning of love in the short article “Love” (1896), written for the eighteen-volume Brockhaus and Efron *Encyclopedic Dictionary*, for which the thinker worked as editor of the philosophy division. Solovyov defines love as “the attraction of one animate being to another in order to unite with it for mutual fulfillment of life.”¹¹ The author distinguishes between three types of mutual love relationships: 1) a descending love, which gives more than it receives; 2) an ascending love, which receives more than it gives, and 3) a love in which both are equally balanced. Solovyov assigns parental love (parents toward children and children toward parents) to the first two forms. He compares the descending love that arises from the older caring for the younger and the strong protecting the weak to the state structure of one’s homeland. He sees the core of mankind’s propensity toward religion in ascending love, where filial attachment extends not only to one’s deceased ancestors, but even to the ultimate roots of being (all the way to God). He calls conjugal love, which he attributes to the third type, or equal love extended between partners, “the strongest expression of personal self-affirmation and self-denial” and “a complete fullness of reciprocity in life,” seeing in it a symbol of the ideal relationship between the personal principle and the social whole. Solovyov believes that, from an ethical point of view, conjugal (or sexual) love is formed by three primary elements: pity, reverence, and shame.

The embodiment of true love, which Solovyov calls the highest manifestation of an individual life finding its own infinity in conjunction with another being, constitutes a syzygy: the restoration of the lost unity of man’s masculine and feminine principles. The absolute, true man in the fullness of his ideal personhood, Solovyov argued, obviously cannot be just a man or just a woman but must be the supreme unity of both. The imperative of this kind of love, according to the philosopher, is not a series of continuous rebirths but victory over death. The couple’s mutual ascent toward God, creating the wholeness of the male and female nature within their communion, Solovyov considered the very peak of human and spiritual intimacy.

The meaning of love as the meaning of life

The Silver Age of Russian culture occurred in the same historical moment as the era of erotic experiments and debauchery, of identifications of *eros* with demonism and death, the same era as “mariages blancs” that implied

the lack of carnal relations between the lovers, the era of perception of sexuality as an expression of biological sex that did not, however, exhaust it.

In *The Meaning of Love*, Solovyov's polemical response to Schopenhauer's *Metaphysics of Sexual Love*, the philosopher proclaimed the need to transform sexual attraction into spiritual potency. This exhortation became, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the manifesto for a Third Way in relations between man and woman. It was seen as the declaration of a new understanding of love as the creative transformation of lovers who, in moving closer to one another, return to God. Solovyov's identification of love with the transformation of passionate energy into creative energy, which echoes Fedorov's concept of positive chastity, was further developed in the works of Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Boris Vysheslavtsev. For many of Solovyov's followers, his reflections were not just speculative maximums but the facts of his personal life experience.

For example, Alexei Losev's understanding of true love had nothing to do with issues of either "flesh" or "sex," similarly it was not an invitation to the joys of earthly being. In his love, Losev saw an earthly projection of Divine Love, a personal way of ascending to our Celestial Homeland through sacrifice and suffering. It was this understanding of love that he laid at the foundation of his life strategy. The spiritual syzygy of Alexei Losev and Valentina Loseva was marriage and mutual adoption of monastic orders in 1929, a reciprocal love that stood the test of those terrible years the spouses spent in the Gulag, which led Losev to conclude that "love is the most effective way of achieving and comprehending the highest meaning of life."

Scholars have frequently called the love between Margarita Morozova and Evgenii Trubetskoi, which in many respects realized the promise of the early twentieth-century Russian religious renaissance, "a reception of V.S. Solovyov's philosophy of love." Trubetskoi's main book, *V.S. Solovyov's Worldview*, was dedicated to his beloved woman. The author made no secret of the fact that she alone understood the reality behind Solovyov's philosophy of *eros*. In private correspondence, Trubetskoi admitted that his work touches on the meaning of his and Morozova's romantic relationship. Anatolii Cherniaev, one of the contributing authors to the collection *Philosophical Emanations of Love*,¹² directly states that the love letters between Trubetskoi and Morozova are valuable above all as an attempt to translate the ideas of Solovyov, the man who inspired this religious-philosophical renaissance, into personal life, into a loving relationship between a man and a woman.¹³ It is evident that Morozova and Trubetskoi saw their mutual love as the meaning of life and creativity, as

a way to bridge the gap between the contemplative life of the metaphysician and the active life of the citizen.

Without aiming to characterize each text published in this issue of the journal, I would briefly outline the diverse approaches taken by its authors. The works compiled in this issue differ in style and in the range of sources used, including art, documents, and research. While presenting readers with the basic values, mythologems, and cultic occurrences of the Russian Silver Age, Maria V. Mikhailova examines the evolution of feelings of love that connected Vyacheslav Ivanov and Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal from the moment they met to the dramatic events that followed Lydia's death. Olga R. Demidova discusses the erotic utopia of that renowned nineteenth- and twentieth-century tripartite fellowship, the Merezhkovsky couple and Dmitry Filosofov, focusing on a selection of intellectual events in the life of that "triumvirate": their history of creating the programmatic polemical collections *Tsar and Revolution* (1907) and *Kingdom of the Antichrist* (1921), as well as the play *Poppy Blossom* (1906). The study of the concept of love in Sergei Bulgakov's philosophy in the context of the spiritual romance between Bulgakov and Yulia Reitlinger (or Sister Ioanna, after taking the veil) is built on Alexei P. Kozyrev's skillful work with the epistolary legacy and diaries of his protagonists. Vladimir I. Sharonov's lengthy work dedicated to the tragic love between Lev Karsavin and Elena Skrzhinskaia has an uncommon wealth of factual evidence and depth of penetration into the spiritual experience of its protagonists. The majority of documents used in the writing of this piece involve archival discoveries still unknown to readers and eyewitness accounts transcribed by the author himself. Kseniia V. Vorozhikhina reconstructs Lev Shestov's philosophy of love through his work, skillfully weaving the dramatic history of the philosopher and his beloved, Varvara Malakhieva-Mirovich, into an array of metaphysical issues.

The essays on the creative destiny of Russian philosophers included in this issue should not be conceived as merely a lesson in life or morality. The life stories of the thinkers discussed here are important for understanding how the early twentieth-century Russian philosophical tradition was shaped by love-as-passion, love-as-reliance, love-as-rapture, love-as-support, love-as-infatuation, love-as-service, and love-as-friendship.

Notes

1. F.K. Sologub, "Predislovie," in *Liubov v pis'makh vydaiushchikhsia liudei XVII i XIX vekov* (Moscow: Moskovskoe knigoizdatel'stvo, 1913), p. 8.

2. P.A. Florensky, *Stolp i utverzhdienie istiny* (Moscow: Pravda, 1990), vol. 1, p. 785.

3. V.S. Solovyov, *Smysl liubvi*, in V.S. Solovyov, *Sochineniia v 2 tt.* (Moscow: Mysl', 1988), vol. 2, p. 513.
4. Solovyov, *Smysl liubvi*, vol. 2, p. 522.
5. Solovyov, *Smysl liubvi*, vol. 2, p. 527.
6. Solovyov, *Smysl liubvi*, vol. 2, p. 514.
7. Solovyov, *Smysl liubvi*, vol. 2, p. 517.
8. V.S. Solovyov, "Zhizennaia drama Platona," in V.S. Solovyov, *Sochineniia v 2 tt.* (Moscow: Mysl', 1988), vol. 2, p. 615.
9. Solovyov, *Smysl liubvi*, vol. 2, p. 510.
10. Ol'ga Matich, *Eroticheskaia utopiia. Novoe religioznoe soznanie i fin de siècle v Rossii*, trans. Elena Ostrovskaia (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008).
11. V.S. Solovyov, "Liubov'," in *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' Brokgauza i Efrona* (St. Petersburg: Aktsionernoe izdatel'skoe obshchestvo F.A. Brokgauz—I.A. Efron, 1896), vol. 18, p. 235.
12. *Filosofskoe emanatsii liubvi*, ed. Iu.V. Sineokaia (Moscow: Izdatel'stkii dom IaSK, 2018).
13. A.V. Cherniaev, "'Ia perezhivaiu v tebe real'no obraz vseedinstva!': retseptsiia filosofii liubvi V.S. Solovyova v 'liubovnoi družhbe' M.K. Morozovoi i E.N. Trubetskogo," in *Filosofskoe emanatsii liubvi*, p. 349.