

Why the Study of Virtues Tells Us More About Russia Than the Study of Values

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Why do so many studies of political culture in Russia tend to produce boring, familiar accounts that describe the essential ambiguity of Russia's progress toward democracy and the market economy? The everyday moral intuitions shared by the majority of Russians are rooted in the ethics of virtue, rather than the ethics of principle. Hence a search for values, which allegedly underlie actions that conform to these principles, misses the point. Perhaps, one should study virtues instead.

This memo will first outline the character of Soviet practical morals largely inherited by contemporary Russia. Next, it will contrast research approaches based on searches for values and searches for virtues. Finally, it will consider some implications for contemporary Russian politics and society.

The purge manuals of the Soviet Communist Party reveal that a hidden agenda of this bloody ritual was the vast individualization of the Soviet populace, in that many former peasants and workers were forced for the first time in their lives to seek a definition of themselves distinct from the identity of the group to which they belonged. This process forced those involved in the purges to engage in self-reflection and self-definition, as individuals. What was revealed during the purges was that the individual was understood as a moral character—a set of desirable character traits demonstrated in action. That is, during purges, the Bolsheviks were examining a given person's set of moral qualities rather than his or her actions' conformity to a general rule. The Bolshevik Party was more interested in personal virtue than in rule-conforming behavior and the universal applicability of moral law.

Actually, Western students of Soviet morals have long characterized the specificity of this ethical system as based on moral character rather than on moral rules. An analysis of the 1961 Moral Code of the Builder of Communism, adopted by the XXII Party Congress, together with the last version of the Party Program shows, for example, that although the Code enumerates certain principles, "the emphasis clearly is placed on morally praiseworthy attitudes, sentiments and predispositions, making it a statement of exemplary character rather than of conduct rules" (Kit Cristensen, 1994).

Official ideals might have been subverted in the everyday life of Soviet citizens, but a general modality of ethical intuitions was not; attention to character traits as opposed to general rules of conduct prevailed. Included in the standard secondary school program on Russian literature, a verse by Maiakovsky started with a line known by generations of Soviet children:

Krokha syn k otsu prishel ... “A kid came to his father and asked, ‘Father, what is good and what is bad?’ ” The father then enumerated a series of typical situations that revealed virtuous and vicious qualities of character. Maiakovsky also offered a more advanced version for teenagers, in the famous poem “Lenin,” where he states: *Iunoshe, obdumyvaiuschemy zhitie...* “To a youth thinking about a model from which to make his own life, I say, ‘Make it from that of Feliks Dzerzhinskii!’ ” The structure of setting up and following a moral exemplar is clearly outlined here: one should not learn the general rule that applies to all situations of moral choice; rather, one should simply follow examples of heroic deeds in making the appropriate judgment on the right course of action in the right time and the right place. Exemplary lives of virtuous Communist heroes were supplied by a voluminous literature of Socialist Realism, which—as U.S. academics were quick to point out—was so formulaic because it employed the main methods of compiling the vitae, that is, the lives of the Orthodox Christian saints.

Orthodox Christianity, of course, had a perennial discourse on virtues, largely exemplified by these vitae, but also liturgy and psalms, and moralistic miscellanea (collections of didactic sayings of church fathers and other famous practitioners of the good life). Even the first Slavonic translations available to Russians carried with them a description of Christian virtues. The first extant text, *Izbornik* of 1073, mentions four types of virtue: prudence, justice, chastity, and courage. The *Izbornik* of 1076 includes the exhortation by St. Basil the Great, “How a Man Should Live,” which details monastic virtues, but was mistakenly addressed by a Kievan scribe to the laity. When sermon-writing first became practiced at the Muscovite court in the middle of the seventeenth century, the Ukrainian and Belorusan scholars who started doing this not only followed the Latin writings on virtues they learned from their Polish-influenced teachers, but also incorporated their knowledge of these early translations of the eleventh–fourteenth centuries. By the time the 1917 revolution came, the moral language available to Russian peasants, when they had to express their moral intuitions, was largely the language of Christian virtue. The Bolsheviks had to deal with this cultural background and their success (or some would say, failure) in imposing their discourse of revolutionary justice on the peasant majority of the Russian population came through an unintended compromise with this background of everyday moral intuitions of what virtuous life was.

In short, Soviet morality was a morality of virtue rather than a morality of principle. Alasdair MacIntyre’s classic *After Virtue* (1981) and the U.S. academic discussion that followed articulated this now famous distinction between virtue ethics—the morality of appropriate action that eschews general rules—and a modern Kantian or utilitarian morality of law that is predicated on the application of a standard universal rule to any situation of everyday life. In short, virtue ethics that prevailed in Antiquity and medieval Christianity suggested that people would have certain qualities that were desirable for their own sake because they were part of a good life. Aristotle was the first to give us a detailed description of virtue ethics. His followers distilled the list of four cardinal virtues of an ancient ruler or warrior-gentleman (prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, close to the list of first Slavonic texts mentioned above), and when Aquinas made Aristotelianism part of Christianity, he superimposed three theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) on the four cardinal ones. Averroes did the same for Islam, integrating Aristotle into doctrinal teaching, as did Maimonides for Judaism. In fact, it was through Averroes that Western Europe first became extensively acquainted with Aristotle. This common moral ground of the medieval world was shattered by a modern critique of religion. The disappearance of a divine sanction of morals spelled death to scholastic Aristotelianism as well: a

modern universalistic system of morals had little recourse to his teaching on desirable character traits. Most students of virtue ethics conclude that even when current versions of ethical theories use the term virtues, what they are speaking about usually is different values.

Gertrude Himmelfarb has stressed that the word value itself became a central term of ethical discourse only after Nietzsche. Paradoxically, only when the reevaluation of all values was announced, did the term “value” become acceptable itself. Until then, the German word *Wert* was central to economic science, but was not part of moral discourse. Heavily indebted to Nietzsche, Max Weber and Georg Simmel made the term fashionable in sociology, with Weber famously demanding that judgments of fact and judgments of value be separated. If the former were subject to false/true distinction, the latter depended on a purely subjective choice or intuitive preference. When in the 1940s and 50s, Talcott Parsons and Clyde Kluckhohn built their respective systems of social and anthropological theory, they made cultures differ primarily in terms of key values they allegedly espouse. Empirical researchers from the 1960s until the present have followed their ideas, perfecting the instruments of uncovering different values of different cultures, with the World Values Survey project becoming one of the most important and expensive examples of such research.

Now, uncovering hidden values usually involves asking respondents to choose the proposition that is closest to their opinion among the many offered. Answers are then grouped as indicating support to a certain general principle representative of a certain democratic value or a pro-market orientation, and the general degree of democratic or pro-market leanings of the population in question is calculated. A widespread criticism of this approach is that it is notoriously unreliable in cultures that are based on widespread distrust of survey research, viewed as linked to power holders (a reality not entirely eschewed in Russia up until now), or in cultures willing to cooperate with a researcher in producing answers she is thought to be seeking. But even more important is another criticism that claims that value surveys measure the frequency of typical discursive reactions to questions in artificial survey situations and the statistical correlation between these discursive reactions, while it tells us nothing about how people act in real life.

Instead of positing hidden values (which one hopes to discover by standardized questioning in artificial research situations) that allegedly move people, one could better engage in research that might account for what people actually do. At least, in the Russian case, instead of hypothesizing on what Russians believe (and thus frequently imputing into their heads what is not and has never been there) one should abandon the implicit Protestant model of motivation that holds that people act on stated beliefs, or follow rules of action prescribed by their values. Looking at virtues, that is, character traits deemed desirable for all, might tell us more about what guides the everyday conduct of citizens of a given state.

What are the implications for contemporary Russian politics and society? Answering this question first entails an examination of what virtues are central for contemporary Russian life. Because the vocabulary of virtue is alien to recent empirical social studies of Russia, this question seems hard to answer. For example, studies of contemporary work ethic tend to focus on attitudes and values, rather than virtues, thus describing the passage to a new post-Soviet work ethic as a transfer from the previously prevalent passive-hedonistic values to achievement values. Furthermore, if one continues to look for sound values exemplified in Russian everyday

life today, one is bound to end up in despair: it seems that standards of morality are almost gone—crime and social deviance are rampant.

However, focusing on virtue might better explain what is going on now. For example, reputation studies lie at the heart of many attempts of new institutional economics that have tried analyzing transaction costs in societies with weak contract enforcement mechanisms. Now, reputation can be described as a communal mechanism of evaluating a set of virtues of a given human being. In fact, an evaluation of saintly virtue was at the heart of the main individualization practice of the Soviet purges, and this practice in its peaceful and attenuated form persisted until now in the form of the Russian birthday party celebration. During this celebration, each participant is expected to propose a toast that expresses the evaluation of certain features of the character of a “birthdayee,” thus contributing to an emergence of a joint evaluation. Similar mechanisms function in Russian professional communities informally evaluating their members and perhaps, one might find such mechanisms at play in the establishment of a business reputation.

Attention to virtues rather than values may allow us to refocus Russia’s quest for a new type of ethic that may found a better future. For example, a study of the ethos of those whom contemporary Russians call bandits and violent entrepreneurs shows that these virtuosos of violence share a certain way of life that cherishes personal qualities rooted in sports team activities of the Soviet past. Self-restraint in talk and action, courage sometimes bordering on total disregard of death, friendship and help to a warrior-comrade—all these qualities are part of the ideological self-representation shared by these communities. A set of similar virtues is offered to the public by an immensely popular recent gangster movie *Brother 2*, which has a lamentable chauvinistic core. Still, the movie can be seen as asserting a set of seemingly obvious historic Russian virtues like justice (*pravda*), courage, prudence of practical judgment, and even patriotism—and all of these are vibrant in what is usually taken to be the current condition of the almost total moral collapse of former Soviet values.

Another point has to be made here. Instead of unmasking the gangsters’ discourse as misrepresentation (this is a task for a normal critical sociologist), a virtue theorist might try doing what Aquinas did to the Christianity of the thirteenth century, founding the Christian virtues on the bedrock of cardinal virtues of a hero warrior that suited the Germans and the Irish of his days so well. As Macintyre noted in his classic work, in early medieval society, characterized by the absence of institutional mechanisms of conflict resolution, this was an ingenious way of integrating warring tribes into the world of Christian morality and, more or less, predictable behavior. One can propose ways in which a new ethos can be articulated in a similar way in post-Communist Russia. That is, one cannot persuade virtuosos of violence by sermons, nor can one bring recalcitrant populations to listen to didactic speeches coming from the state. But articulating what they are already doing—competing to establish standards of excellency in certain spheres of activity—in the language of virtue might refocus their lives and solidify their allegiance.

The final implication is the opportunity to compare radical virtue regimes and their sequels on the basis of a single common denominator—a reception and adaptation of Aristotelian ethics. One of the reasons for Aquinas’s creativity in adapting Aristotle to Christian purposes was the need to wrestle the main intellectual weapon from the Arab conquerors—a serious threat at that time. Indeed, not only Averroes but also Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali made Aristotle palatable to

Islam long before he became central to the school of thought in Western Christianity. In Russia, the only book of advice to princes that Ivan the Terrible had in his possession was a pseudo-Aristotelian treatise, originally written in Arabic in the seventh century AD and known in its Latin versions as *Secretum Secretorum*. This book on princely virtues was made available to Russian tsars through a Slavonic translation from a Hebrew version (with added interpolations from Maimonides) done in Kiev around the 1490s. Now, given ethics of virtue was a common denominator of all these moral traditions, a well-founded comparison of the revolutionary politics of virtue, and a concomitant reconceptualization of certain contemporary problems, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, become possible. It was not accidental that the main Taliban governmental agency was called the Ministry of Virtue and Vice.

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