

Solzhenitsyn Reconsidered II

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The recently published book, *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard*, is at once too much and too little. It consists of a translation of Solzhenitsyn's June, 1978 Harvard Commencement address ("A World Split Apart"), a dozen early reactions and responses to the address, and several further reflections. Many of the early pieces exhibit unreasoned outrage, and most of the later ones are displays of academic expertise. From the array we learn more about the foibles and follies of liberal intellectuals than we do about Solzhenitsyn.

To treat one speech as if it revealed the heart and mind of a man is always a questionable endeavor. In Solzhenitsyn's case, however, we have some license to make the attempt, for he has informed us in his writings that his every action is deliberate. He does not speak with haste or waste. When he cannot choose his audience, he can still choose what to say to it. The Commencement speech, we may assume, was altogether his choice.* He undoubtedly chose to examine the fundamental principles of liberalism at Harvard because Harvard is the symbol and bastion of liberalism's noblest aspirations. That it remains so was eloquently reaffirmed by Harvard's President Derek Bok that same day. The contributors to *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard*, even the ones without Harvard pedigrees, are all respected representatives of that tradition. To the extent that they have failed to appreciate or to understand Solzhenitsyn's argument they lend credence to his thesis: Liberalism cannot sustain liberalism's noblest aspirations, and liberalism is consequently not enough.

Most of the contributors implicitly dismiss James Reston's contention that the speech is "the wanderings of a mind split apart," but they acknowledge that "A World Split Apart" is complex and in need of explication. One might shed some light on it by means of textual exegesis, but of the contributors only Charles Kesler has attempted this (and acquitted himself quite well indeed). Or one might have recourse to what is known of Solzhenitsyn's deeds and to his other writings. Only Ronald Berman, the literary scholar and editor of this volume, and Harold Berman, the expert on Soviet law, have used Solzhenitsyn's

*Solzhenitsyn has not publicly rued his choice, but he has recently acknowledged a misjudgment: He thought Americans desired and appreciated criticism. (In fact, they savor criticism only from the Left.) See Solzhenitsyn's "The Courage to See" in the Fall 1980 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

other works in their arguments. Or, finally, one might rely, as have most, on one's expert knowledge of the Soviet and Russian dissident traditions from which Solzhenitsyn has emerged.

Of Solzhenitsyn's deeds little is known other than what he has told us in *Gulag*, *The Oak and the Calf*, and rare interviews. We do know in addition that he is a member of the Russian Orthodox Church, and we have no right to doubt his piety. He is said to take pains with the religious education of his children (as did many of our parents). He has made his home in exile in the United States, and we cannot suppose that he did so because Vermont is the only place in the non-Communist world that resembles Mother Russia. He has felt sufficiently endangered to have built a large unattractive fence around his property, and he went to a Cavendish town meeting to apologize for the fact. Combining Soviet-bred fears and American ways once again, Solzhenitsyn has improved upon Samizdat with the Xerox machine he keeps in his living room. Rumor has it that he knows more English than he allows, but Solzhenitsyn is not given to spending time "chatting at filling stations." Rather, he leads a life of isolation no serious scholar or writer could fault except out of envy. A man in his sixties with a sober awareness of human mortality and a burning desire to complete his life's work, Solzhenitsyn spends his days writing.

Since these details are at best sketchy and, in any case, do not account for the content and tone of the Harvard speech, more satisfying explanations must be sought. Unfortunately, the most common ones seem the least justified.

Solzhenitsyn is referred to by most commentators as a "prophet." Since prophecy is less in vogue with the intellectual establishment than with the Moral Majority, the appellation is not meant as a compliment. The epithet, in any case, is unwarranted. To my knowledge Solzhenitsyn has never proclaimed himself to be a prophet, and the language of neither the Commencement speech nor his other writings can fairly be termed prophetic. Solzhenitsyn has no more pretensions than any social scientist who makes predictions on the basis of his data and thus speaks "Truth." In fact he has fewer pretensions, for all he does is to state the choices open to us and account for their being our choices. His analysis of the West is strikingly similar to that of the enduring darling of American social scientists, Alexis de Tocqueville. In his memoir Solzhenitsyn does say that his life has a "higher and hidden meaning" of which he has to be reminded by "the Supreme Reason which no mere mortal can at first understand." By this he seems to mean that events in his life forced him to infer some purpose to it. His life's purpose, he has come to understand, is to speak and act with political intent, for example, to do his best to ensure that justice is aided with the publication of *Gulag*. Justice can be done only when the truth is known, and Solzhenitsyn's not yet completed multi-volume history of the Russian Revolution is meant to bring to light truths that are "universal, and even timeless." Ronald Berman argues that Solzhenitsyn's true greatness as a writer lies in his ability to understand and depict human life in its political context; "his ideas of culture and politics . . . are the work itself." What is required of us to hear the Harvard speech is not an openness to prophecy, but a willingness to consider that many truths about our politics and culture are indeed bitter.

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theocrat? But common opinion notwithstanding, Solzhenitsyn is not a theocrat. True, he has contended that the only alternative to Communism for the Russian people at this time is Orthodoxy. Yet he has never urged the Soviet leaders to do more than tolerate *all* religions (as do we). When he elaborates on his hopes for the spiritual regeneration of the Russian people he speaks of the school, not the Church. None of the heroes of his novels and stories are religious, or at least their virtue does not presuppose piety. Nor has Solzhenitsyn promoted organized religion, much less theocracy, in the West. He has said, "Religion should make an appropriate contribution to the spiritual life of the nation" (whatever "appropriate" means). He laments the fact that we have lost the "concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility." But on its face this statement no more evokes worship of the Christian Trinity than intellectual appreciation of the Platonic Good, the Aristotelian *nous*, or the Parmenidean One. Solzhenitsyn speaks not of a personal god to whom we necessarily owe obedience, but of an intelligible principle of order. He uses the words "spirit" and "spiritual" in as many senses as we do—not only as the locus of religiosity, but as intellect, as the animation of a people or an individual, and as that which leads us to suspect that there is more to a human being than a body with material needs and physical pleasures. And for all his insistence that our world find a place for the principle of soul, he could not reject more emphatically a religion that contravenes nature by contemning the body's needs and desires altogether. As Kesler suggests, the deepest meaning of "a world split apart" is a world in which the natural unity of body and soul is denied and the needs of one or the other neglected. Kesler also leads us to recall that only the Classical world (which Solzhenitsyn neither praises nor criticizes here, but of which he shows an appreciation in his writings) strove for such wholeness.

Michael Novak, who welcomes the Commencement speech as "the most important religious document of our time," can do so only because he interprets Solzhenitsyn's lament for the loss of "the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity" as a demand for the return to religion and a "theocentric" society. He also believes that Solzhenitsyn agrees that it is possible to ground the political institutions of a "liberal, pluralistic, constitutional democracy" on various religions which grow, that is, converge on the basis of their common principle of truth-seeking. Unfortunately, Novak's cheerful characterization of Solzhenitsyn's position requires Solzhenitsyn to have lost the understanding of what a revealed religion is. Each religion begins with its own non-negotiable truth, and none needs to seek what it already has. In contrast, the philosopher Sidney Hook holds that in his concern with a Supreme Complete Entity Solzhenitsyn is "profoundly, demonstrably, and tragically wrong." Rather than demonstrate Solzhenitsyn's error, however, Hook asserts (without demonstration and contrary to all experience) that mankind can agree to unite in the defense of freedom and morality without any agreement about "God, immortality, or any other transcendental dogma."

If Solzhenitsyn's critics cannot have him as a theocrat, they would at least have him as a partisan of autocracy or authoritarianism. But here too their assertions lack a firm foundation. Solzhenitsyn's explicit recognition of the

obvious fact that some authoritarian regimes are better or worse than others cannot be construed as a recommendation of either variety. Solzhenitsyn has said that a non-Communist authoritarian regime would be best for Russia now because in her thousand-year history Russia has had only eight months experience with constitutional government. (Why do those who cannot abide Solzhenitsyn's defense of the Vietnam war, because they regard the war as an attempt to impose our ways on another people, not extend their cultural and political relativism to Russia?) The authoritarianism he recommends for Russia is, moreover, a curious one, for it would be ruled by law and incorporate the principle of separation of powers. So far is Solzhenitsyn from urging the West to adopt authoritarian ways that he criticizes the American press for subverting our representative institutions while it wields power irresponsibly. Elsewhere Solzhenitsyn has voiced a more fundamental objection to Western constitutional democracies: Western constitutional democracy invariably means party government, and party government is rule on behalf of a part or in its interest. The only consensus is that somebody's interests be served. A statesman is not required and is hardly permitted to think about the common good. Perhaps Solzhenitsyn did not offer this objection in the Commencement speech because he wished his audience to think about the most urgent common good for the sake of which all liberals can unite—the survival of the West and thereby of humanity.

It is also said of Solzhenitsyn that his "rantings" can be disregarded because he does not know the West; either he is unfamiliar with it or his own cultural bias blinds or blurs his vision. But as George Will, Kesler, and Ronald Berman suggest, the real issue is whether Solzhenitsyn knows Western ideas, particularly those on which modern Western politics are grounded. We do not know what Solzhenitsyn has read. Before World War II and Gulag he had been trained in mathematics and physics, but surely none of the contributors to this book believe that all human beings stop reading and thinking once they have their diplomas in hand. In any case, what Solzhenitsyn has read about the West is not decisive, for if (as the old saying goes) "truth is one," the same truth can be discovered anew in any time and place.

To assert that Solzhenitsyn is a latter-day Slavophile, implying that this is all we need to know to understand Solzhenitsyn and his speech, is at best a diversion. The issue is whether Solzhenitsyn is right or wrong, not who has taught him to pose the questions he raises. If the finding of similarities and tracing of influences is to be at all fruitful one must have a firm grasp of what it is one is about to reduce to its antecedents. Ronald Berman can cite as many Western sources as Richard Pipes can cite Slavophiles. Who is the winner? The danger in being content with tracing influences is apparent in Harold Berman's otherwise intelligent and interesting essay. In finding Solzhenitsyn's criticism of Western legalism rooted in Slavophile objections that laws tend to be all letter and no spirit, Berman overlooks a crucial fact of Western legal history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the very principle of law in Western civilization underwent a radical change. The principle "what the law does not command, it forbids" became "what the law does not forbid, it permits." Laws that were to "command all the virtues" were replaced by mere "hedged." The

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issues involved in this change are at the core of what is, according to Will, "the most ancient and honorable theme of Western political philosophy." William McNeill is only mildly and briefly upset by the whole issue of perspective and cultural relativity because he thinks Solzhenitsyn's central proposition is that a nation needs "a unifying ideal or myth"—not a universal truth—to sustain its will. McNeill expects us to be saved by a nihilistic assertion of Western will in the name of nothing more than a myth.

Solzhenitsyn holds that the precariousness of the West's existence is due to a mistake at its very root: the "rationalistic humanism or humanistic autonomy" that became the basis of its political and social doctrine. The principle of modern Western politics, he says, is "that governments are meant to serve man and that man lives in order to be free and pursue happiness." Thus Solzhenitsyn understands liberalism better than liberals do, for just such a principle was articulated by Thomas Hobbes, proponent of modern liberal politics whom Solzhenitsyn has recently attacked in *Foreign Affairs* magazine. According to Hobbes, man is naturally free. Unhindered, human bodies would move not toward "a Supreme Complete Entity," but toward the various objects of their desires, the continual attainment of which might be called happiness. But in such a condition of perfect freedom, life would be so intolerable that men would consent to government and laws to limit their natural freedom. Government serves man by securing peace and preservation. Laws, when good, are as few and as limited in scope as possible out of respect for the presumption of natural liberty. The morality of modern liberalism is nothing more than obedience to the laws that make peace possible. However minimal these laws might be, modern politics does not require—nay, forbids—individual appeal to any higher moral or religious principles.

Because Hobbes' doctrine is grounded on a universal fact of human nature, it should be universally applicable. And Hobbes insists that it is true as well as salutary. All opinions compatible with the metaphysical dogma of this "humanistic autonomy," that the first principle is the individual human body, are tolerable. Religion can therefore be tolerated in a modern polity only when the faithful no longer take religion and its possible truth seriously.

The most obvious political defect of liberalism, as Hobbes and his critics anticipated, is that it cannot sustain military courage. If the preservation of one's own body is one's greatest (and most justified) concern, how could it ever be reasonable to risk one's life for any person or principle? Although Hobbes' doctrine does not require a petty materialism in everyday life (one is still free to indulge the "lust of the mind" for knowledge), the common desire for material well-being is likely to be ubiquitous. Liberalism is transformed into the welfare-statism or socialism and finally the nihilism of liberal intellectuals only when they try to elevate the vulgar passions for equality and material well-being to principle. Having lost any measure of man but his state of preservation, they become incapable of making a reasoned distinction between noble and base aspirations.*

*That Solzhenitsyn believes our most fundamental danger to be intellectual, not military, has been made perfectly clear in his two recent statements in *Foreign Affairs*, as well as by the fact that

Solzhenitsyn advises us, his friends, that "no one on earth has any other way left but—upward." He does not urge a return to either the Middle Ages or the early optimism of the Enlightenment. We cannot defend liberalism without an awareness of its weaknesses as well as its strengths. Liberalism's claim to be universally true and beneficial is belied in a world split apart. To think about the profundity of liberalism's difficulties is to have begun our ascent. Solzhenitsyn's demeanor, which offends most of the contributors to *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard* and even its publishers, complements his argument, for he personifies a quality which is antithetical to the spirits of both Christianity and liberalism, but is the peak of Classical virtue; *megalopsychia*—greatness of soul, or pride.

he chose as his forum a scholarly journal. A political science that has become contemptuous of universal doctrines is blind to the nature of Marxist regimes as well as liberal ones. Our scholars leave Western statesmen dumb before those who still wish to see and hear what Solzhenitsyn calls "a proud, principled and open defense of freedom."

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