

Package Beliefs and Partyiness

by Gary Saul Morson

Mikhail Bulgakov's exuberant satire *The Master and Margarita* tells the story of the devil's visit to Stalinist Russia, where he and his retinue amuse themselves playing practical jokes directed at the smug certainty of official ideology. One demon, who calls himself the "retired choirmaster" Korovyov, encounters an office director who, to please his superiors, makes all his employees join various clubs that fill their free time with wholesome collective activity. "In just a year's time the director had managed to organize a Lermontov study group, a chess-and-checkers club, a ping-pong club, and a horseback-riding club. And he threatened to have two additional clubs in place by summer: one for fresh-water rowing and the other for mountain-climbing." When Korovyov suggests a singing club, the director agrees, and "encouraged everyone to be enthusiastic."¹

Within minutes Korovyov sets the office workers singing and, promising to be back right away, leaves. For a moment all is quiet, but then "suddenly

they started singing the second verse as if of their own accord.... They finished the second verse. Still no choirmaster! They went back to their places, but before they could manage to sit down, they started singing against their will. It was beyond their power to stop. They would be quiet for three minutes or so, and then start up again." At last they are taken off to the insane asylum, where people who have encountered these devils usually wind up.

Russian readers had no difficulty grasping the meaning of this incident: in Russian life, everyone sang in chorus. Stalin himself was often praised as the great "coryphaeus" (chorus leader). No one refused to sing and no one dared to stop. Readers also understood that in most cases no force was required to induce complete conformity. People sang together "as if of their own accord."

The Bolsheviks drew on a long tradition of intellectual conformity. Even in the age of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, the radical intelligentsia demanded uniformity of opinion. In addition to the tsarist censorship, authors contend-

ed with the intelligentsia's informal "second censorship." Most educated people found it much easier to profess a ready-made truth than to think for themselves. Since uncertainty, as Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor explains, entails painful doubt, guilt, and regret, people willingly trade their freedom for promised certainty. All Dostoevsky's major novels feature young intellectuals who love to recite a jumble of progressive clichés without ever considering any of them seriously.

Russian literature repeatedly asks: why are educated people, who pride themselves on their superiority to superstitious hicks, so ready to silence critical judgment? Why are they so eager to sing in chorus? It is a question very much with us today: no one, it often seems, is more intolerant than the highly educated. Often enough, they claim to speak for "science," but the most essential aspects of science—encouraging rigorous criticism to test favored theories and judging by evidence rather than authority—seem to have escaped them. As medieval thinkers claimed divine revelation to preclude objections, intellectuals today appeal to what they call "settled science."

The art critic Harold Rosenberg famously referred to "the herd of independent minds."² So we can ask: what makes them a herd? Russia took herding to an extreme, so it is a good place to turn for answers.

Stiva

Tolstoy addressed the issue with humor. At the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, he introduces us to Anna's brother Stiva (Stepan Arkadyevich), who is immensely popular. Stiva "was liked by all who knew him," Tolstoy explains, primarily because his cheerful geniality is infectious. People feel better after every conversation with him, even when nothing particularly delightful has happened. If there is such a thing as a natural man—a person at one with the natural world—then Stiva is the natural man of society, at one with the social world and everyone in it.

Stiva is a liberal and reads a liberal paper,

not an extreme one, but one advocating the views held by the majority [of his circle]. And in spite of the fact that science, art, and politics had no special interest for him, he firmly held those views on all these subjects that were held by the majority and by his paper, and changed them only when the majority changed them—or, more strictly speaking, they seemed to change of themselves within him.

Stepan Arkadyevich had not chosen his political opinions or his views; these political opinions and views had come to him of themselves, just as he did not choose the shapes of his hat and coat but simply took that they were in style.³

Stiva has adopted his views as a package. On issue after issue, he agrees with his paper. When I was a visiting professor at Stanford some four decades ago, I encountered two professors, who evidently did not know each other, waiting for a tardy elevator. One

of them gingerly ventured an opinion, and when the other agreed, they both assumed they concurred on every other issue, which they went through one by one. How could they be so sure? Isn't it possible to agree on some topics but not on others?

The answer, as Tolstoy understood, is: not if one adopts views as a package. Every now and then, of course, someone doesn't. Stiva's friend Levin, for instance, is always changing his mind as experience shows that he has been mistaken. When he hears a strong opposing argument, he considers it, and so his opinions are a hodgepodge of liberal, conservative, and utterly idiosyncratic ideas, which are always changing. Levin has trouble understanding those landowners who, like his friend Sviazhsky, cling to methods for managing an estate even when their failures repeatedly cost him money.

What does it mean for Stiva to "firmly hold" views that he has not seriously examined? If Stiva or Sviazhsky should hear an opposing view, they would already know just what to say in response. And each would say the same thing. When a person accepts views as a package, he also learns the accepted reply to familiar objections and the approved way to handle counter-evidence. The very firmness of their opinions—and they are all equally firm—testifies to package thinking. Levin is not only much less firm, he is also less committed to some views than to others.

There is no logical reason why supporting gun control, Hamas, transgen-

der women participating in women's sports, gay rights, higher taxes, and defunding the police, should align or, as we say today, "intersect." This package (like conservative and radical counterparts) shifts in lockstep. Interventionist foreign policy has been favored by both parties at different times, as has support for Israel and free trade, even though it would be hard to identify a moment when a party's position altered. That is why it is so easy for politicians to dig up their opponents' previously safe but now radioactive opinions. Stiva's views change, but he doesn't change them: "they seemed to change of themselves within him." No agency is involved.

Looking back on the revolution and its aftermath, Lara, the heroine of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, identifies "the root cause of all the evil" around her—people's willingness to slaughter and celebrate slaughter—as "the loss of confidence in one's own opinion. People imagined that it was out of date to follow their own moral sense, that they must all sing in chorus, and live by other people's notions, notions that were being crammed down everybody's throat ... there arose the power of the glittering phrase," emotionally charged positive or negative words that disarm individual thought.⁴

Perhaps the best known passage in Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoir *Hope Against Hope*—already a classic of Russian literature—concerns the almost magical power that shared opinion held (and holds) for intellectuals. "My brother Yevgeny Pavlovich used to say

that the decisive part in the subjugation of the intelligentsia was played not by terror or bribery (though God knows there was enough of both), but by the word ‘Revolution,’ which none of them could bear to give up. It is a word to which whole nations have succumbed, and its force was such that one wonders why our rulers still needed prisons and capital punishment.” There were times when even Nadezhda’s independent husband, the poet Osip Mandelstam, “would say that he wanted to be with everybody else, and he feared that the Revolution might pass him by.”⁵

Before and after the Revolution, Russian literature has contrasted two types of educated people; those who, like Stiva, select their beliefs as a package and those who, like Levin, think independently. It also presents scenes in which the independent thinker offers apparently decisive counter-evidence to the package thinker’s views only to see the most cogent argument have no effect. Package thinkers are evidence proof. Whenever Levin tries to get past “the outer chambers” of Sviazhsky’s mind, “he noticed that Sviazhsky was slightly disconcerted; faint signs of alarm were visible in his eyes ... and he would give him a kindly, good-humored rebuff.”

By contrast, one of Sviazhsky’s guests, described simply as “a reactionary landowner,” interests Levin because he expresses his own point of view. Hearing the landowner’s unconventional ideas, “Sviazhsky looked with smiling eyes at Levin and even made a faint ges-

ture of irony to him, but Levin did not think the landowner’s words absurd.” Levin listens—actually listens and seriously considers—what the unconventional thinker is saying:

The landowner unmistakably spoke his own thought—a thing that rarely happens—and a thought to which he had been brought not by a desire of finding some exercise for an idle brain, but a thought which had grown up out of the conditions of his life, which he had brooded over in the solitude of his village and considered in every aspect.

Levin reacts not automatically, but attentively: he considers the experiences that have led the landowner to his views. By doing so, Levin can, so to speak, graft the landowner’s experience on to his own, and, having more experience to reflect on, actually learn something. Whether he eventually agrees or disagrees is not the point. Levin admits something new, something surprising, into his thought, not to devise some way of vindicating his previous opinions, but to follow the new idea wherever it might lead. Then and now, that is something that “rarely happens.”

Partyness

Official Soviet literature featured variations on a familiar plot.⁶ A young man, filled with spontaneous enthusiasm for Communism, decides how to meet challenges and acts accordingly. His heart is in the right place, but his choices lead to bad consequences precisely because he has acted on his own initiative, rather than follow Party

dictates. He must learn to prefer “consciousness”—the scientifically based decisions of the Party—to “spontaneity.”

The goal of every good Communist was partiinost, literally “partyiness.” To achieve partyiness, one must learn to prefer Party opinions and commands to one’s own best judgment and most personal commitments. In Vasily Grossman’s novel *Life and Fate*, the devoted Bolshevik Getmanov believes that “every decision had to be infused with the spirit of the Party.... The attitude of a Party leader to any matter, to any film, to any book, had to be infused with the spirit of the Party; however difficult it might be, he had to immediately renounce a favorite book or a customary way of behavior if the interest of the Party should conflict with his personal sympathies.”⁷

The more closely one resembles a pure instrument of the Party, the more one resembles a mere cog in a machine; and Stalin, indeed, once offered a famous toast, “to the cogs!” Getmanov aspires to the highest form of Partyiness: “a true Party leader simply didn’t have any personal likings or inclinations; he loved something only because, and only in so far as, it expressed the spirit of the Party ... true Party spirit showed itself when a sacrifice was not even necessary, when no personal feeling could survive if it happened to clash with the spirit of the Party.”

The dissident Lev Kopelev, once a fervent Bolshevik, explained:

The ability to see everything—theory and practice, the past and the present, others and oneself—precisely as required by the Party at any given moment; the ability to think and act only in the interests of the Party under any and all circumstances—that was Bolshevik “partyiness,” as we called it. This partyiness was an almost mystical concept.⁸

Ideally, one reaches the point where one does not have to suppress other inclinations since Party-minded thoughts are all one has. Individual mind is replaced by the collective mind of the Party. One does not think, the Party thinks within one.

Kopelev described how, as a committed young Bolshevik, he enthusiastically participated in enforcing Stalin’s engineered famine, which took the lives of millions during the collectivization of agriculture. “I took part in this myself, scouring the countryside, searching for hidden grain ... stopping my ears to the children’s crying and the women’s wails ... For I was convinced that ... their distress and suffering were a result of their own ignorance or the machinations of the class enemy.”⁹

What disturbed Kopelev was not taking food from swollen, starving children, but his pity and residual compassion for them. Amazing as it may seem, the Soviets regarded pity and compassion as vices. As we teach children to overcome their instinctive selfishness, the Soviets taught them to overcome their instinctive compassion, which, it was explained, might lead them to spare a class enemy. By the same token, as Nadezhda Mandelstam observed, the word

“conscience”—referring to individual moral judgment—passed out of use and even began to sound archaic. It was replaced by the word “consciousness,” as in “class consciousness.”

Partyness may be seen as package thinking taken to its logical end. A person makes one decision—to adopt the Party’s viewpoint—and after that, everything else follows. It is important to recognize that once one thinks this way, one can justify literally anything. It is not as if ordinary Russians decided that starving children was good; if that had been so, the Party would not have concealed their starvation campaign. Rather, people decided to be good Communists and follow the Party’s leadership in all circumstances. They signed a blank check.

On October 8, 2023, thirty-four Harvard student organizations endorsed the tortures, sexual mutilations, and murders committed by Hamas the day before, but I do not believe most signers did so either because they favored torture or even, for the most part, because they hated Jews. They did so, I surmise, because once they had lined up with progressive opinion, they followed it regardless. This form of blank-check antisemitism does not necessarily entail any dislike of Jews. I find it much more disturbing than the antisemitism that does, because there are likely to be far more package thinkers than passionate haters; and also because the package thinkers can go on thinking of themselves as good, humane people. When I was younger, I was shocked to read that

even most Nazis had not cherished hatred of Jews; they had instead accepted the party’s platform which included it.

Souls Lost and Found

Is there any escape from package thinking? What allows a few mavericks to defy the herd? For understandable reasons, that, too, is a central question of Russian literature.

The greatest works of the Soviet periods were unofficial. They did not win Stalin prizes. Unorthodox and unpublishable, they were written “for the drawer.” We know the ones that circulated in samizdat or appeared abroad.

The more publishable a work of Soviet literature was, the more likely it was trivial. And the more likely to win the equivalent of a Pulitzer.

Remarkably enough, three of the four greatest prose works written in the militantly atheist USSR were explicitly Christian—Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*, Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, and Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*—while the fourth, the Jewish Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, also affirmed absolute spiritual values. These works often reverse the characteristic plot of official socialist realism: they narrate how a person taught to think in the approved Bolshevik manner realizes not only that official philosophy is wrong but also, and more importantly, that he never truly believed what he thought he believed. The hero learns the difference between accepting received opinions and actually thinking.

In *Life and Fate*, the dedicated Bolshevik Krymov, who has approved of Stalin's bloody methods and denounced anyone he suspected of less than perfect loyalty, gradually learns to question all he has held dear. He realizes that it is not what he doubts that truly matters, but that he doubts at all; questioning itself represents a lapse from partyness. It is itself a crime. When he is arrested, he oscillates between recognizing the injustice of his fate and re-affirming, in spite of all he undergoes, what has given his life its meaning.

Krymov's doubts first take shape when he remembers Bukharin, Rykov, Kamenev, and other Bolshevik leaders mourning at Lenin's funeral. They had all turned out to be "foreign spies and provocateurs," while Stalin, who then seemed inconsequential, proved the only true Leninist. Why had these revolutionary friends of Lenin all confessed? Krymov recalls that he did not believe in Bukharin's guilt and yet sincerely endorsed his condemnation. How was that contradiction possible? "I still believe that my zeal was genuine," Krymov reflects. "What is it I am trying to say? That I am a man with two consciences? Or that I am two men, each with his own conscience? But that's how it's always been—for all kinds of people, not just for me."

Probing the paradox of sincere belief accompanying profound doubt, Krymov recalls his former student Koloskov, who came from a peasant village and recounted heartrending tales of the enforced famine, yet published an arti-

cle stating that "the kulaks felt a violent hatred for everything and were burying their grain in the ground. Why, after crying his heart out, had Koloskov written such things?" Perhaps for the same reasons that Krymov himself had failed to defend friends he knew were innocent? On the one hand, "Krymov had said things that went against his deepest feelings." And yet "he had always believed what he said in speeches and articles; [and] he was still convinced that his words were a true reflection of his beliefs."

Krymov next wonders "why he had had nothing more to do with the families of comrades who had been arrested" while "old women, middle-class housewives" would even, in spite of the danger of doing so, offer to send parcels to those comrades. What's more these "old women ... superstitious domestics and illiterate nannies, would even take in children whose mothers and fathers had been arrested" while Party members "avoided these children like the plague. Were these old women braver and more honorable than Old Bolsheviks?"

One might suppose that fear explained the failure to do what was right, but Krymov knows that there is more to it. Fear, in fact, can even serve as a convenient excuse to conceal something worse. "No, no! Fear alone cannot achieve all this. It was the revolutionary cause itself that freed people from morality in the name of morality, that justified today's pharisees, hypocrites, and writers of denunciations ... that ex-

plained why it was right to elbow the innocent into the ditch in the name of the happiness of the people.” Once one joins a cause and adopts a package of beliefs, morality entails adhering to the cause and doing otherwise immoral things in the name of morality itself.

For me, the most distressing aspect of today’s package thinkers is not any particular belief they endorse but the fact that they could just as easily endorse much worse ones. Once a person trades conscience for a package, there is no limit.

The most effective way to ensure one does not say something dangerous is to persuade oneself that one sincerely believes what is safe. One must learn to merge with one’s role and so make private self and public identity congruent. “After long acquaintance with his role,” Czesław Miłosz explained, “a man grows into it so closely that he can no longer differentiate his true self from the self he simulates, so that even the most intimate of individuals speak to each other in Party slogans.” Have we not all heard such conversations, in which people, with apparent sincerity, repeat what they have heard on approved news sources almost word for word? “To identify self with the role one is obliged to play ... permits a relaxation of one’s reflexes,” Miłosz continues. “Proper reflexes at the proper moment become truly automatic.”¹⁰ Safety lies in becoming, so far as possible, a zombie, an automaton, or a cog.

Solzhenitsyn traced his own awakening to the moment when, as a prison-

er, he remarked to another inmate, Boris Gammerov, that, of course, President Roosevelt’s public prayer was insincere. Gammerov angrily demanded to know why Solzhenitsyn did not admit the possibility that Roosevelt might actually believe in God. “I could have replied very firmly,” Solzhenitsyn recalled, “but prison had already undermined my certainty ... and right there it dawned on me that I had not spoken out of conviction but because the idea had been planted in me from outside.”¹¹

“Planted from outside” and yet apparently sincere: Solzhenitsyn describes the moment when one recognizes that one does not believe what one believes one believes. It is the moment when self and role separate, and one is on one’s own. That is also the story told by many modern dystopias, from Zamyatin’s *We* to Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

That revelatory moment shapes several Tolstoy stories. The eponymous hero of “The Death of Ivan Ilych” succeeds brilliantly in his judicial career because he merges perfectly with his role. Nothing personal ever clouds his professional judgment. “The thing was to exclude everything fresh and vital, which always disturbs the regular course of official business and to admit only official relations with people, and then only on official grounds.”¹² But when Ivan Ilych recognizes that a disease is slowly taking his life, he realizes to his horror that even though his roles will continue, he personally will die. By making himself identical to his role,

he has lost his soul, and that is all that matters.

Choirmaster Korovyov makes much the same point when, by his magic, a role performs itself without any person to get in the way:

Behind the desk with its massive inkwell sat an empty suit, moving a pen with no ink in it over a sheet of paper. The suit was wearing a tie, and had a fountain pen sticking out of its breastpocket, but there was no neck and no head above the collar, nor were there any wrists poking out of the sleeves. The suit was hard at work and completely oblivious to the confusion raging all around.... The beautiful secretary let out a shriek, wrung her hands, and screamed, "See? Do you see? He isn't there! He's not!"

"He isn't there!": and was this bureaucrat truly there even before the empty suit took his place? After all, when the bureaucrat at last returns, he approves everything the suit has done because he would have done precisely the same thing. If the empty suit is a magical artifact without a soul, is he? The bureaucrat signs off on decisions, but can he take responsibility for them?

For Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, morality begins with personhood. Each person acknowledges the irreplaceable personhood of each other person. Not only is each soul unique, it continually changes in surprising ways. Or as Bakhtin expresses the point:

A man never coincides with himself. One cannot apply to him the formula of identity $A \equiv A$... the genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non-coincidence between a man and himself, at his point of departure beyond the limits of all that he is as a material being,

a being that can be spied on, defined, predicted apart from its own will, "at second hand."¹³

One's true self begins where all external categories—class, gender, epoch, nationality, even personality type—end. I am what is left over. Nothing could be further from the official Soviet view, or the self-erasure of package thinking, than Bakhtin's statement of the central idea of realist novels:

An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories. There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and forever all of his human possibilities and needs, no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word ... no form that he could fill to the very brim and yet at the same time not splash over the brim. There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness.¹⁴

Any attempt to make oneself just like others, to think as one's favored group does, erases one's unique "surplus of humanness." The surplus shrinks to nothingness, and one betrays something more important than one's life.

When I observe graduate students eager to show off how thoroughly they have mastered what they are supposed to think, when I see a colleague reluctant to consult his conscience, and when I see academic life so constrained as to make genuine dialogue impossible, I imagine the Soviet conditions to which all this may soon lead. I regret no less strongly how cheaply highly educated people are willing to sell their souls.

As *Life and Fate* begins, the author observes: "Everything that lives

is unique. It is unimaginable that two people ... should be identical ... If you attempt to erase the peculiarities and individuality of life by violence, then life itself must suffocate." Grossman continues this thought when the Jewish heroine Sofya Levinton is dying in a Nazi gas chamber. He reflects: the smell of each flower, the rustle of each leaf, and the universe as a whole appear different to each soul. To erase that difference is to erase the soul itself. "What constitutes the freedom, the soul of an individual life, is its uniqueness ... life ... is only endowed with freedom and meaning when someone exists as a whole world that has never been repeated in all eternity." The worst crime of the Bolsheviks is not their mass destruction of life, but their attempt to destroy the soul. And everyone who strives to think like others, to adopt views as a package, participates in that crime.

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