

Concepts of the person in the symbolist philosophy of Viacheslav Ivanov

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Abstract Viacheslav Ivanov's concept of person underwent significant development in the course of his career. In his earliest works the person is a transient form that is to be superseded by union with the supra-personal, transcendent self. In works of his middle period Ivanov posits the person as an image of the transcendent self. Lastly, in the 1910s Ivanov integrated these two concepts into a hermeneutic view of the person as an agent of transcendence.

Keywords Viacheslav Ivanov · Person · Personhood · Personality · *Sobornost'* · Symbol · Image

Viacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov (1866–1949) was both a poet who exulted in the music of concepts and a philosopher who analyzed the conceptual structure of his own poetry. All dimensions of Ivanov's work were buttressed by his rare erudition, which equipped him to envision and develop his creative premises and philosophical intuitions in a vast historical perspective, especially in his two major studies in the history of Greek religion. This poet-thinker avoided precise philosophical systems, resorting at times to heterogeneous and sometimes irreconcilable images and ideas. In literature he was a modernist and neo-romantic, closest to Shelley, Novalis and Tjutchev; however he also influenced the Russian avant-garde and declared a new classicism. In religion Ivanov variously defined himself as Russian Orthodox, Catholic and neo-pagan, though there are grounds for considering him a pantheist. As a philosopher he was equally eclectic and syncretic in his allegiances and references, appearing in turns as a Platonist, a scholastic, a Kantian, a Schellingian, a Nietzschean and a Solov'evian.

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Therefore it is difficult to formulate a single concept of personhood in Ivanov's philosophical writings. Ignoring his relatively long "incubational" period before he began to publish actively (1866–1902), one can identify three major periods in his creative development: heroic supra-individualism (1902–1908, dominated by the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche); metaphysical symbolism (1908–1912, dominated by the influence of Plato and Vladimir Solov'ev); personalism (1912–1920). After 1920 Ivanov was distant from Russian cultural life (first in Baku, and from 1924 in Italy) and dedicated his literary-theoretical and religious-philosophical activity to summarizing and reprising his earlier ideas, at times simply re-writing earlier essays for publication in the languages of Western Europe.

Ivanov first became known in 1902 with the publication of his first poetry collection *Kormchie zvezdy* (Pilot Stars), which included his best poems from the previous fifteen years. In such poems as "Russkij um" (The Russian Mind), "Skif pljashet" (The Scythian Dances) and "Suum Cuique" (from the series "Parizskie epigrammy" [Parisian Epigrams]) one sees the clear influence of the Slavophiles, especially in the claim of Russia's special religious and historical task: "The name of Fraternity and Freedom/Is revered by nations in writing:/The Gaul—on his churches and palaces,/The Briton in his laws, but we in our hearts" (Ivanov 1971, vol. 1, p. 628). However these are traces of a nationalism that Ivanov had largely grown out of by this time. Ivanov's main creative spirit is expressed in the title of the collection's first part "Poryv i grani" (Impulse and Limits), which denotes both the eternal striving of the individual person to unity with the cosmos and the forms which condition and restrain man's infinite ambitions.

Person (lichnost', litso) is for Ivanov a relative form which is transcended in this endless striving towards the *supra-personal* (sverkhlichnoe), which can be understood as divinity, cosmos or will. In his early publications Ivanov defines this striving with reference to the cult of Dionysus, the god of "individuation," a term which Ivanov derived from the scholastic concept of "principium individuationis" via Schopenhauer's "Individuation."¹ Ivanov also made contentious use of the phrase "transcende te ipsum" (transcend yourself) from St Augustine's sermon "On the Holy Sabbath," which is interpreted in the spirit of Nietzschean "transcensus sui" (Ivanov 1971, vol. 1, p. 823; Ivanov 2001, p. 5). In Ivanov's writings on the Dionysian religion one notes a contradiction: Dionysus (i.e. the human being's resistance to static forms of existence) is regarded both as the cause of original individuation (i.e., the person's willful rejection of cosmic unity) and as the path to destroying the borders of individual personhood and restoring the original unity: "Truly, Dionysianism is the dismemberment of the individual, the separation of the 'I' from itself."² The opposing force is denoted by Apollo, who "as a preserving measure and limit saves the human 'I' in its centrifugal self-alienation and as the correct objectification of our inner chaotic agitations heals and

¹ Viacheslav Ivanov, "Ellinskaja religija stradajushchego boga," *Novyj put'* no. 1, 1904, p. 122.

² Viacheslav Ivanov, "Ellinskaja religija stradajushchego boga," *Novyj put'* no. 5, 1904, p. 31.

resolves creatively the just madness of the spirit as it emerges from its oppressive limits.”³ “The Dionysian rupture of the individual’s limits finds in multiplication (as the restoration and final affirmation of individuation) its opposite pole.”⁴ The state of ecstasy (*ek-stasis*, emergence from out of the self) is equated to “just madness”: “generations yet to come will experience the sacred madness in which the human being learns to regard himself as ‘not I’ and to regard the world as ‘I,’ acquires himself for the first time in living nature, as divine in divine unity, as suffering within the suffering God, and as blessed with the grace of the Comforter.”⁵ From this contradiction arises the tragedy of the *person*, who experiences a will to sovereignty (or, as Ivanov frequently writes, for self-determination) only to find that true sovereignty requires unity with the whole. Regarding Hamlet, for instance, Ivanov wrote in his article “Krizis individualizma” (Crisis of Individualism, 1905): “Whether openly or secretly, each tragedy reveals the spirit of theomachy (i.e., the substitution of a relationship of conflict for the relationship of concord and dependence). Hamlet struggles not actively, but in his unconscious and intellectual depths. He struggles not with the world but with shadows—the shadow of his beloved father, and through him—with his own other self, with his ancient self. He cannot conquer the shadows or his own double and he turns on himself, on his true ‘I,’ as an apostate from himself and as a victim of himself ...” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 1, p. 833). An even better image of Ivanov’s philosophy than Dionysus or Hamlet is Prometheus, the son of Thetys, goddess of the earth, the defender of humans before supreme god, and the victim of divine retribution: Prometheus’s self assertion culminates in his apotheosis and fall, nonetheless his light continues to burn for humanity as a promise.

Alongside the Dionysus-Apollo dichotomy Ivanov made free use of the terms *spirit* and *soul*. *Spirit* is usually synonymous with *supra-personal* or the divine; *soul*, by contrast, is a synonym of *personhood* as a transient, sensual and fragile form of being. *Soul* and *spirit* command a much broader range of meanings and may be used, for instance, with reference to an entire nation: Dionysus (the infinite) and Apollo (finitude) are discovered to be “two poles of the Greek *soul*.”⁶ In his later works, after his emigration, Ivanov developed this dichotomy into a doctrine of “Anima” and “Animus,” under the influence of Paul Claudel and parallel to Carl Gustav Jung.

These premises give rise to a distinctive narrative, which Ivanov projects onto various planes of theoretical reflection: the hero wills himself and destroys the obstacles to self-achievement and self-expression, however without the support of divine being he must surrender his autonomy to the supra-personal, God or the spirit. Thus, in “Krizis individualizma,” Ivanov contrasts individualism, which nurses an ideal of the *superman*, to religious *supra-individualism*, which Ivanov identifies with the Slavophiles’ concept of conciliarity (*sobornost’*).

³ Viacheslav Ivanov, “Ellinskaja religija stradajushchego boga,” *Novyj put’* no. 7, 1904, p. 130.

⁴ Viacheslav Ivanov, “Ellinskaja religija stradajushchego boga,” *Novyj put’* no. 3, 1904, p. 40.

⁵ Viacheslav Ivanov, “Ellinskaja religija stradajushchego boga,” *Novyj put’* no. 3, 1904, p. 50–51.

⁶ Viacheslav Ivanov, “Ellinskaja religija stradajushchego boga,” *Novyj put’* no. 1, 1904, p. 123.

Ivanov's works of his first period bear a markedly ethical character. For him the basis of the *person* is will, which is based in the universal spirit but requires freedom for its manifestation. In "Krizis individualizma" this view is summarized as a categorical imperative: "act in such a way that the willing motive of your action coincides with the norm of universal willing that you recognize.... Serve the spirit or the true 'I' in yourself with the fidelity that you would desire from another in his service of the spirit which resides in him, and let the ways and forms of service diverge: the spirit breathes where it will" (Ivanov 1971, vol. 1, p. 833).

Borrowing terms from Saint-Simon, Ivanov developed this concept of the person into a theory of alternating critical and organic periods in history: "The organic epoch is analogous to the Edenic state of childlike being in the womb of the Creator, not because it is heaven and the golden age of lost happiness, but because the center of consciousness is there, outside the person and not in it. The critical epoch is an epoch of Luciferian revolt of individuals who have desired to become 'like gods'" (Ivanov 1971, vol. 3, p. 330).

From these religious-philosophical (or religious-historical) premises Ivanov derives an aesthetic program, a social critique and even a political ideology. In contrast to Western rule of law, which limits the exercise of will, Ivanov proposed an anarchic social structure. Together with Georgii Chulkov, in the years after the 1905 revolution Ivanov advocated the ideology of mystical anarchism, which held that the free exercise of will by individuals would lead the world to a higher state of being: "Individualism in its modern, inadvertent and unconscious metamorphosis, is attaining features of *sobornost'*"; this is a sign that the laboratory of life is working out a synthesis of the personal principle and the principle of *sobornost'*. We see a symbol of this synthesis in the deeply and variously significant word—a word that attracts and frightens, which is declared as a solution and is yet as indeterminate as a riddle: the word 'anarchy'" (Ivanov 1971, vol. 1, p. 839).

An important component is also the sexual aspect of personhood. From early on Ivanov affirmed that "The sense of sexuality was a sense of the entire mystery, the substrate of all divinely-prophetic and extra-human experiences of the spirit. For while love chooses and separates the person, its roots lie deep in the chaos of the impersonal. ... In each combination of individuals the entire gender seeks the entirety of the [other] gender and the idea of the species is victorious over the idea of the individual."⁷ The *personhood* of women is more sensitive to the *supra-personal* element: "The male person is limited more definitely, like a lake closed on all sides; the female person is limited by the bounds of her individual consciousness, like a bay that amidst its shoreline cliffs hides an invisible exit into the open sea" (Ivanov 1971, vol. 3, p. 140).

Traces of Ivanov's supra-individualism can be found in his later works, though only in distinct contexts, mainly in Ivanov's analyses of heroic and self-sacrificing artists like Aleksandr Skrjabin. In 1914 Ivanov writes: "The universal thirsts for *sobornost'*, and the supra-personal cannot fit in the bounds of the person. ... It is no surprise that the most sensitive and bold experience in themselves a shift of the axis around which revolves the healthy spiritual person, who in Plato's words is similar

⁷ Viacheslav Ivanov, "Religiia Dionisa." *Voprosy zhizni* no. 6, 1905, p. 187.

to a planetary body that describes its celestial circuits that are determined by the harmony of the spheres, along the dark earth” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 3, pp. 163, 165). In his 1919 essay “Krizis gumanizma” (The Crisis of Humanism) Ivanov wrote: “The crisis of humanism is the crisis of the inner form of human self-consciousness within the personality and through the personality. When this form changed, it became eccentric with respect to the personality; left to itself, it was as if the personality had become formless. A vague but mighty sense of the all-human whole became ascendant in our souls, engendering in them an elemental impulse to unite into collective bodies. Humanism was completely based on surmounting people’s individuation, separation, and isolation, their mutual foreignness, transcendence, and impenetrability, the “autarchy” of harmonious man. This inner form of consciousness has become obsolete because the personality was unable to fill it with universal content, and it became the mummy of former life or a decaying corpse” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 3, p. 377; Ivanov 2001, p. 170).

In the second period of Ivanov’s work the concept of *personhood* (*lichnost’*) is replaced by that of the *person as image* (*litso*), in which human beings are increasingly understood as aesthetic quantities. True, Ivanov had previously spoken of the ability of the mask to transfigure the human face within a cultic or dramatic rite: “A masked or painted man seems to himself and to others to have turned into the being whose image he has adopted.”⁸ In his 1908 essay “Dve stixii sovremennogo simvolizma” (Two Elements in Contemporary Symbolism) this terminological substitution is linked to a strengthening of the Christian identity of Ivanov’s theories. Instead of endless metamorphoses, which dissolve the person in the cosmos, Ivanov proposes a merging of the person with the image of Christ: “Christianity revealed the mystery of the image and affirmed the personality once and for all” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 2, p. 542; Ivanov 2001, p. 18). Over time, perhaps under the influence of Pavel Florenskij, Ivanov’s concept of *person as image* is divided into three phases: *countenance* (*lik*) denotes the ideal state of the person as he was intended to be by the Creator; *face* (*litso*) is the state of person in time; *mask* (*lichina*) is the superficial mask that the person adopts and which does not necessarily correspond to his inner spirit.

A crucial component of Ivanov’s metaphysics in this intermediate period is the re-conceptualization of the phrase “thou art,” derived from Ivanov’s studies of Greek religion: the person acquires being (“I am”) when he affirms the very concept of divine being (“God is”) by recognizing the other as possessing being (“thou art”). If the person affirms himself in separation from the whole (“I am”), then he is deprived of true being. These ideas were developed in Ivanov’s essay “Religioznoe delo Vladimira Solov’eva” (“The Religious Task of Vladimir Solov’ev,” 1910): “Man, as creature, is conscious of his cognitive dependence on some external reality, and he seems to himself to be similar to a living mirror. All that he cognizes is a mirror reflection subject to the law of the refraction of light, and, consequently, it is an unfaithful reflection. In this reflection the right side becomes the left, and the left becomes the right. The connection and proportionality of the parts remain the same, but the parts switch places. The projection of the reflected body onto a surface

⁸ Viacheslav Ivanov, “Ellinskaja religija stradajushchego boga,” *Novyj put’* no. 3, 1904, p. 52.

does not match the original figure, even though the lines are combined in the same order. How can truth be restored to the reflection? Through its secondary reflection in a mirror pointed at the mirror. For man as cognizer, this *speculum speculi* (the second mirror that corrects the first) is another man. Truth is justified only when contemplated in another. Where two or three are gathered in the name of Christ, there, amongst them, is Christ Himself. Thus, faithful cognition of the mystery of being is possible only in mystical communion, i.e. in the Church” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 3, p. 303; Ivanov 2001, pp. 195–196).

One consequence of Ivanov’s use of the term *person as image* (litso) in this period was that human being became less the agent than the object of cultural and ethical action. True art is supra-personal: “In true myth we no longer see the personality of its creator or our own personality, but we believe directly in the truth of the new insight” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 2, p. 555). *Person as image* gains authenticity as it becomes more similar to its eternal prototype, the countenance: “Man ascends to God by various paths, and man’s noetic countenance and sign differs from his visible form” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 4, p. 593). On this basis Ivanov intensifies his critique of extra-ecclesial religion and of non-religious art; he seeks to synthesize historical and metaphysical analysis into a single method. In his 1911 essay “Lev Tolstoj i religija” (Lev Tolstoj and Religion) Ivanov criticizes Tolstoj for “his neglect and, as it were, misunderstanding of all the factors that determine the personality, such as heredity, psycho-physical idiosyncracies, peculiarities and anomalies, the influence of the social environment, upbringing, etc.” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 4, p. 599; Ivanov 2001, p. 207). Yet Ivanov also criticizes Tolstoj as an “unmasker” who removes the veil from the human essence, in contrast to positive or “en-robing” art which restores the human image as a countenance revealing “the wrought icon of the sophianic world of eternal archetypes” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 4, p. 602; Ivanov 2001, p. 209).

Ivanov’s characteristic ethical concept in this period is the aesthetic concept of mimesis, and the main agent of cosmic unity is the theurgic artist: “As soon as forms are correctly combined and coordinated, art instantly becomes vital and significant: it turns into a signifying vision of the interrelations that innately tie forms to higher essences; into the holy, visionary action of love, which conquers the division of forms; into a theurgic, transformational “*Let it be.*” When this mirror is turned onto the mirrors of fragmented consciousnesses it restores the original truth of what is reflected, amending the guilt of the first reflection, which had distorted the truth. Art becomes the ‘mirror of mirrors,’ ‘*speculum speculorum*’; due to this very reflective quality, everything becomes a symbolics of united being, where each cell of the living, fragrant tissue creates and glorifies its own petal, and each petal illuminates and glorifies the glowing center of the unknowable flower: the symbol of symbols, the Flesh of the Word” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 2, p. 601; Ivanov 2001, p. 47). In the final analysis the *person as image* is understood as a picture, or rather an icon, or rather even a fragment of the single cosmic Icon, while ethics is reduced to the decoration of the human visage.

The personalist period in Ivanov’s philosophical work begins with the 1912 essay “Mysli o simbolizme” (Thoughts on Symbolism), is confirmed in the 1913 essay “Manera, litso, stil” (Manner, Persona, Style) and is consummated in the 1914

essay “On the Limits of Art” (O granitsakh iskusstva), where the term *man* (chelovek) replaces *person* (lichnost') and *person as image* (litso). Without explicitly foreswearing his earlier formulations, Ivanov shifts the emphasis from the cosmic and aesthetic spheres onto the human person as the agent of artistic and cosmic creation. True art requires more than seeing “noetic countenances”; the artist needs to find and develop his or her distinctive *persona* (litso) as an ethical category: “however we might judge the independent calling of art, its independence from life and its incommensurability with an individual personality, for a true creator, life and art are nevertheless the same: even if Apollo does not call the poet to holy sacrifice every day, each time he calls the poet, he demands the entire man” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 2, pp. 616–617; Ivanov 2001, pp. 59–60). Ivanov posits a possible conflict between the *man* (who always strives to ascend) and the artist (who is obliged to descend to his audience, dressing his revelations in accessible form). For the first time Ivanov speaks of art as the servant of humanity, and not vice versa: “although any true symbol is a kind of incarnation of divine truth, and thus by itself reality and real life, still it is reality of a lower order, ontological only within the concatenation of symbols, but only conditionally ontological relative to lower reality, and meonic in comparison to higher reality. Consequently, the symbol is true life to an endlessly lesser degree than Man (Ivanov 1971, vol. 2, p. 646; Ivanov 2001, p. 86). Symbolism is art that ensures the “growth of the person” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 2, p. 633; Ivanov 2001, p. 74): “Symbolism is founded on the principle of accumulating spiritual knowledge of things and on the general surmounting of the personal principle, not only in the artist as such, and not only at moments of purely artistic creation, but in the artist’s very *personality* and in all of his life, by means of a supra-individual, universal principle. The inner canon is the law of organizing the *personality* in accordance with universal norms, the law of vivifying, strengthening and realizing the connections and correlations between individual being and collective [*sobornyi*], universal and divine being” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 2, p. 640; Ivanov 2001, pp. 80–81). Art is thus a model of communication which not only conveys information but also enables the “growth of the *person*” in the beholder.

It is worth noting in conclusion that Ivanov’s life-long opposition to “western” individualism was actually a rejection of the modern concept of personality. In a 1913 lecture on Novalis Ivanov wrote: “The entire middle ages were imbued with the cult of the *Virgin*. But the *Renaissance* destroys it, evoking strong *individualism*, i.e. each separate person achieves the fullness of his self-definition to such a degree that it feels itself separated from the entire world. The complete evolution of the social idea would be impossible without this individualization. ... Personhood found its ‘I’ within itself, but it did so in an excessively empirical manner and abused it; this is a kind of fall into sin which can be redeemed only by developing religious creativity—the creation of a new religious consciousness. The excessive development of individual perceptions destroyed the sense of connection of all with the Mother-Earth, and hence followed the fall of the cult of the Mother of God. (In the Catholic Church this sense never died.) With this sense of the World Soul is linked all that is most vital in poetic and lyrical writing” (Ivanov 1971, vol. 4, p. 739).

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