

A new anthropology: Sergej S. Khoružij's search for an alternative to the Cartesian subject in *Očerki sinergijnoj antropologii*

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In his latest book, *Očerki sinergijnoj antropologii* (2005), the Russian scholar of philosophy and theology Sergej S. Khoružij takes a step beyond his insightful studies on the history of Russian religious philosophy and on Hesychasm for which he is already held in high esteem by scholars of Russian thought and Orthodox theology. The publication of *Očerki* might well contribute to enlarging this readership, and is apt to provoke attention even among those philosophers who prefer to stay clear from religious philosophical debates. *Očerki* is a study in philosophical anthropology. It is a contribution to critical debates about the Cartesian foundations of modern philosophy informed by but not limited to the author's grounding in Orthodox theology.¹ Khoružij does bring forward a decidedly 'Eastern' response to the 'crisis of the European subject'² which is so high on the agenda of contemporary philosophy, but he also reformulates this crisis in terms that go beyond the immediate horizon of Eastern Orthodoxy. In this review, I want to look at Khoružij's argument step by step, and I will draw from this analysis not only conclusions on the place of this particular text in the entire oeuvre of Khoružij, but also on the overall potential of a philosophy informed by the Orthodox intellectual tradition.

¹ 'Cartesian foundations' refers not only to the philosophy of Descartes, but to the classical metaphysics of the subject as essence more generally, a metaphysics which, as Khoružij shows in a series of essays on European anthropology, runs through modern philosophy from Scholasticism all the way to Kant. See also: Khoružij (2004); Khoružij (2005a): 52–63; Khoružij (2005b): 72–102.

² The phrase 'crisis of the European subject' refers not only to the book by Julia Kristeva that carries this title (Kristeva 2000) but to a more general topic in contemporary philosophy, namely the deconstruction of the human subject in philosophy. 'Who comes after the subject?' is a question posed in an edited volume of French philosophy (Cadava et al. 1991) and Khoružij's text, which makes reference to this work, can be read as one attempt to answer that very question.

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Khoružij's starting point in *Očerki* is what he perceives as a crisis of mankind. This crisis, he writes repeatedly, is not only a Russian, but a global phenomenon, even though it might have found a particularly sharp expression in post-Soviet Russian society where many people suffered an existential loss of orientation in life with the collapse of the old regime. It is the 'suicide terrorist', Khoružij writes, that marks the existential confusion of our times.³ This crisis is of an anthropological nature for him, it has to do with the way in which human beings conceive of themselves, in how they take a place in the world and vis-à-vis each other. It is a crisis of modern philosophy, politics and economics where the human being was conceptualized in terms of subject, substance, essence. Khoružij attributes the formulation and perfection of this understanding of man to the intellectual legacy of Aristotle, Boethius and Descartes:

"For a long time, a model [of the human subject] dominated European thought in which [...] the identity of a person was understood [...] as founded on substantiality. In the classical European anthropological model, human nature bore the character of a substance. Completing the anthropology of Aristotle, which understood man as a definite system of substances, Boethius, at the beginning of the sixth century,⁴ advanced the famous definition according to which man is an 'individual substance of rational nature'. Later on the concept of subject (a thinking subject, the subject of reason) was added to this definition, and from here emerged the perfect construction of man in its impenetrable philosophical armour: the classical European man of Aristotle, Boethius and Descartes as an essence, a substance and a subject. And as self-identity."⁵

The argument about the birth of the classical metaphysical subject out of the Latin Christian appropriation of Greek philosophy and its consequent development in Western philosophy is spelled out repeatedly in Khoružij's work and in historical-philosophical writings from an Orthodox standpoint in general. The extremely rapid summary of the entire debate in the passage I just quoted is therefore a reference to what is taken to be a thoroughly established argument. Apart from taking the argument for granted, however, there are also clear indications that Khoružij does not linger on the problematic of the classical metaphysical subject because he

³ Khoružij (2005c), 13–14, 146–147.

⁴ Khoružij is referring to the late Roman philosopher and statesman Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (480–524) whose translations of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy into Latin had a decisive influence on scholasticism and Western philosophy. Especially the translation of Aristotelian terminology in logics is of relevance here, for example the Greek *ousia* into Latin *substance*.

⁵ Dolgoe vremena v evropejskoj mysli gospodstvovala model', v kotoroj [...] identičnost' čeloveka traktovalas' [...] na osnove substancial'nosti. [...] V klassičeskoj evropejskoj antropologičeskoj modeli priroda čeloveka nosila imenno kharakter substancii: doveršaja antropologiju Aristotelja, predstavljavšuju čeloveka opredelennoj sistemoj suščnostej, Boecij v načale VI v. vydvinul znamenituju definiciju, soglasno kotoroj čelovek—'individual'naja substancija razumnoj prirody'. Pozdnee sjuda ešče pribavilas' koncepcija sub'ekta (mysleščego sub'ekta, sub'ekta poznanija), i vznikla zakončennaja konstrukcija čeloveka v nepronicaemoj filosofskoj brone: klassičeskij evropejskij čelovek Aristotelja-Boecija-Dekarta est' suščnost', substancija i sub'ekt. I samoidentičnost'—pri nem polnost'ju." Khoružij, *Očerki*, 78–9. (All translations from Russian by KSt)

considers it a development that is, in some sense, over and done with. Here he differs from ‘civilizational’ advocates of Orthodox thought like Christos Yannaras or Dumitru Staniloae, who build on the argument as a proof for culturally and historically grounded differences between the East and the West.⁶ What is important for Khoružij is the fact that this classical human subject, man as an essence and a substance, has increasingly been put into question since the late nineteenth century. The crisis of modern times lies precisely in the becoming-unfounded of the Aristotelian-Boethian-Cartesian subject, and Khoružij reads Western philosophy in the twentieth century as a document of this crisis, referring primarily to the Nietzschean critique of Enlightenment rationality and subjectivity, to the Heideggerian dismantling of classical metaphysics, and to what he regards as attempts to go ‘beyond the subject’ by authors such as Foucault and Deleuze. He situates his own contribution, his ‘new anthropology’ in exactly this philosophical realm.

Before moving to the proposal itself, it is necessary to reflect for a moment on this self-positioning of Khoružij. What is remarkable about the way in which Khoružij locates himself in the postmodern discourse, is how he presents this discourse as the status-quo of Western philosophy. For any Western reader, aware of the debates between Anglo-American and continental philosophy and of serious attempts to offer alternative constructive critiques of Enlightenment rationality, for example Habermas’ ‘communicative reason’, this is puzzling. It is puzzling because Khoružij does not give a balanced account of Western debates on the basis of which he then singles out one strand in which the subject is put under question. The reason for this is obvious: he quite clearly considers all attempts to safeguard the classical understanding of the individual as futile and therefore does not want to lose time with debates that try to stick to it. What stands in a striking contrast to this subscription to a postmodern state of philosophizing, however, and what is, in my view, bewildering even to someone sympathetic to such a starting point, is the *positive* way in which Khoružij’s puts his assertion of the end of the classical subject and the need to move on from there. What I call here *positive* is meant as a counter-term to the searching and fragmented language of most of postmodern thinking about the human subject. There language is an indicator of the difficulty to think ‘beyond the subject’ in an idiom which is profoundly determined by a subjectivist metaphysics. Contemporary philosophers have continued to labour with this problem and their texts are strategies to deal with it.⁷ Khoružij quite clearly does not conceive of this as *his* problem, because he does not see himself as speaking from within this body of thought. He takes his language from a completely different reservoir, namely Byzantine theology (and, partly, from quantum physics). What we are therefore left with is a mixture of a problem-awareness that is ‘inside’, so to speak, and a strategy to deal with it from the ‘outside’ of the problematic.

Khoružij argues in a way that balances the dichotomy of being ‘inside’ the problematic and at the same time ‘outside’ of it. He does locate the crisis (or rather,

⁶ Neamtu (2006), Yannaras (2007).

⁷ The problem of language in the critique of classical metaphysics emerges clearly in Heidegger, who writes about the limitations of his work *Sein und Zeit*: “Der fragliche Abschnitt wurde zurückgehalten, weil das Denken im zureichenden Sagen dieser Kehre versagte und so mit Hilfe der Sprache der Metaphysik nicht durchkam.” Heidegger (1976), 327.

the origin of the crisis) in Western thought, but he does not enter into a polemic with the West. He does not make an argument about a civilizational or cultural divide between the Orthodox East and the West, like many Orthodox thinkers who place themselves ‘outside’ do. The reason for this is, in my opinion, intrinsic to his way of understanding the problem. The anthropological crisis is a phenomenon which concerns Orthodox societies as much as Western societies. It has been recognized and pondered by Orthodox thinkers as much as by Western philosophers. The fact that he derives, from within the body of Byzantine theology, an alternative viewpoint on the issue, does not lead him to the conclusion that an Orthodox society or culture is ‘superior’ to the West.

Let me now turn to Khoružij’s ‘new anthropology’. The starting point is, as mentioned above, the ‘death of the subject’, the crisis of the classical anthropological discourse. This discourse originated in the scholastic appropriation of Aristotle and was based on an essentialist metaphysics, looking at man as an essence or a substance. This approach to man, Khoružij writes, correlated with the intuition of a centre; it assumed the existence of some essential core of the human being and was oriented towards the search for this centre and the study of it.⁸ Today, after the ‘death of the subject’, man can no longer be regarded as having such a thing as a ‘centre’. Alternatively, man should be characterized by his *border*.⁹ Khoružij suggests to us that while it is debatable that man has a centre or essence, it is beyond question that he has a border, a mark of distinction and finitude vis-à-vis another person, in confrontation with the unconscious, or in awareness of his own death. What Khoružij calls for is a reorientation in anthropology, from the study of the human essence or ‘centre’ (*antropologija centry*), which has turned out to be a fiction, to the study of the border (*antropologija granicy*).

What this reorientation in anthropology implies is a shift from focusing exclusively on the human subject itself to comprehending man in relation to his ‘Other’. The nature of the ‘Other’ (*Inobytiya*, transl. *Other-being*) and, consequently, of the relationship between man and his ‘Other’, depends on the way in which man is conceptualized. Khoružij distinguishes two principled ways of conceptualizing man: in terms of being and in terms of consciousness. If man is conceptualized as a specific mode of being, then the ‘Other’ is a different mode of being, a distinction which Khoružij underpins with Heidegger’s *ontologischer Differenz* between *Dasein* and *Sein*. If, by contrast, man is conceptualized in terms of consciousness, then the ‘Other’ represents the Unconscious. Since Being is not at stake in this case, Khoružij speaks about an *ontic* perspective. These two perspectives, the ontological and the ontic, constitute two different topics for the anthropology of the border. (Khoružij eventually adds a third topic, the virtual, more about this below.) Together, the three topics map the anthropology of the border and bring into view man as a polyphonic¹⁰ being. They are not hierarchical or complementary features of human nature but spell out different potentialities of what it means to be human.

⁸ Khoružij, *Očerki*, 13–5.

⁹ “Esli čeloveka nel’zja bolee kharakterizirovat’ ‘centrom’—ego ostaetsja kharakterizirovat’ ‘periferiej’, a točnee—*granicej*.” Ibid., 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., 23.

What holds the three topics together is that the relationship between man and his ‘Other’ is in all three cases conceptualized in terms of ‘manifestations’ (*projavlenie*). Human manifestations, Khoružij writes, are not only acts in an empirical or behavioural sense, but also thoughts and sentiments, or impulses that may or may not develop or be turned into full-scale acts. Khoružij conceptualizes these human manifestations in terms of ‘energies’, basing himself on Orthodox theology and the distinction which is central there, between essence and energy. The mystical-ascetic tradition of Hesychasm, which lies at the bottom of Khoružij’s anthropology, has developed a sensibility to understanding human manifestations in this way.¹¹ Energies, however, are not only a property of human beings, the three modes of Other-being are themselves conceptualized as energetic manifestations. The heuristic parallel which Khoružij uses at this point is taken from physics: synergetic processes in physical systems.¹² The most important of the effects which the interaction of energetic systems produces is the re-structuring of the respective systems. In physics, this is called a ‘synergetic’ (*sinergetičeskij*) process. It is structurally comparable to how Khoružij interprets the interaction which takes place at the anthropological border where human manifestations may be transformed in view of an energetic ‘Other’. Khoružij calls this the anthropological phenomenon of synergy (*sinergia*).¹³ Synergetic processes involve what Khoružij calls ‘extreme (human) manifestations’ (*predel’noe projavlenie*), ‘extreme’ because they manifest themselves at the a person’s ‘border’.

Reading *Očerki sinergijnoj antropologii*, one notes that the anthropological phenomenon of synergy is not accounted for equally in all three topics of the anthropological border. It is clearly the first, the ontological topic, where the paradigm of synergetic anthropology is rooted. At the ontological border (*ontologičeskaja granica*), the being of man himself is at stake. This is where the ‘transcending’ of human nature may take place. Extreme human manifestations at this border are what overcomes a person’s horizon of being in view of another mode of being. Ways of conceptualizing the process of reaching a different ontological state can be found in all spiritual, ascetic-mystical practices. Yoga, Sufism, Buddhist mediation and Orthodox Hesychasm are comparable strategies that aim at the overcoming of human nature. Khoružij’s entire work about Hesychasm can, in fact,

¹¹ Khoružij’s philosophical work takes inspiration from the theological tradition of Neo-Palamism, a point I have made in: Stöckl (2006), 243–269.

¹² “[...] pri podobnom opisaniu fenomenov Granicy voznikaet javnaja parallel’ antropologii Granicy s teoriej fizičeskikh otkrytykh sistem. Dlja takikh sistem glavnuju rol’ v ikh povedenii igraet vzaimodejstvie ikh vnutrennikh energij s vnešnimi, kotorye mogut prokhodit’ čerez dannuju sistemu s silu ego otkrytosti. [...] Dlja fizičeskikh otkrytykh sistem suščestvujut različnye mekhanizmy vzaimodejstvija ikh energij s vnešnej energiej, prinadležaščej nekotomu vnepoložnomu istočniku, i sredi takikh mekhanizmov igraet osobuju rol’ sinergetičeskij mekhanizm, ili sinergetičeskaja paradigma. (The phenomenon of the border can be adequately described as a parallel between the anthropology of the border and open-system theory in physics. [...] Open systems in physics have different mechanisms how their energy interacts with an other energy that derives from some outlying source; among these mechanisms the synergetic mechanism, or the synergetic paradigm, occupies a special place.)” Khoružij, *Očerki*, 20.

¹³ The Russian language allows for a clear distinction between synergetic processes in physics (*sinergetičeskij*) and synergetic processes in an anthropological and spiritual sense (*sinergijnij*). Unless clearly specified, Khoružij always refers to synergy in the latter sense.

be read as a commentary on the ontological border of man. In Hesychasm, the practitioner treats himself as an energetic formation with a view to effecting a *transformation*. Notably, this energetic transformation cannot emanate from the human self alone, it must rely on an interaction with the ‘Other’. From the Christian perspective, this ‘Other’ is the Triune God, and transformation, *theosis*, takes place in view of Divine grace (*blagodat*).¹⁴ In Hesychasm, this process of transformation is called *synergia*. Below, I will come back to synergetic processes at the ontological border. Before that, however, it is necessary to look at the other two topics of the anthropological border.

The ontical topic of the anthropological border is concerned with a person’s being vis-à-vis the Unconscious. More precisely, at the ontical border (*ontičeskaja granica*), human manifestations interact with manifestations that are induced by an energetic source in the same horizon of being but beyond the horizon of experience. The interaction with this ‘Other’ takes the form of psychic conditions that are studied in the field of psychoanalysis. Extreme human manifestations at the ontical border are, for example, neuroses, psychoses, manias—phenomena that are at the borderline of the conscious and un- or subconscious. Khoružij refers mostly to the works of Lacan and Deleuze in his account of the Unconscious. While he largely subscribes to their rendering of the issue, he considers their approach too limited. In his view, psychoanalysis restricts the study of man to the area of the ontical border, denying the existence of the ontological and virtual dimension of human existence. Khoružij sees his task not only in describing the ontical border as only one of three constitutive dimensions of the human subject; eventually, he would like to analyze the ontical topic in view of synergetic processes, but in *Očerki*, this task remains under-explored.¹⁵

The virtual border (*virtual’naja granica*) of man is certainly the most difficult among Khoružij’s concepts and in a sense the least elaborated. We have seen that both the ontological and the ontical ‘Other’ can be conceptualized as energetic configurations that enter into interplay with human manifestations. I read Khoružij to be saying that, by contrast, at the virtual border we have extreme human manifestations, but they point at no ‘Other’ energetic source. The pre-conditions for a synergetic process—the interaction of manifestations of a human and another source—are therefore not given.¹⁶ Khoružij seems to attribute most phenomena of contemporary popular mass-culture to this realm. They are examples for an under-actualization or forgetting of human potential.

With his anthropology of the border, Khoružij is putting forward an alternative to classical anthropology. There, man was defined by his centre and it was assumed that a person’s being in the world hinges on this centre. The clearest example of this is Descartes’s reduction of the self to its bare minimum, the *cogito*. In Khoružij’s anthropology of the border, the contrary movement is taking place. Not a reduction towards a centre, but a triple unfolding towards the outer limits of the self. Khoružij

¹⁴ Khoružij, *Očerki*, 24–35. For a comparative analysis of spiritual practices see also Khoružij (2000), 353–420.

¹⁵ Khoružij, *Očerki*, 35–40.

¹⁶ Khoružij, *O starom i novom*; 311–52, Khoružij, *Očerki*, 40–4.

suggests that man is first and foremost constituted by his relation to the ‘Other’. This relation unfolds in three principled dimensions—the ontological, the ontical and the virtual, and in their possible combinations (‘hybrids’). Where before we would have man as an essence and a centre, and where the post-metaphysical philosophers of the twentieth century philosophy identified a lack, Khoružij puts man as an energetic constellation and a pluralistic being endowed with a triple-border.¹⁷ The main point is that these borders are not closed, but that they are realms in which processes of interaction with the respective ‘Other’ can take place. These processes aim at what Khoružij calls ‘unlocking’ (*razmykanie*), the interaction of man’s manifestations with the energies of the ‘Other’. From an ‘anthropology of the border’, Khoružij has thus moved on to an ‘anthropology of unlocking’, *synergetic anthropology* (*sinergijnaja antropologija*).

It is important to note at this point that Khoružij finds the prerequisites for such an ‘anthropological unlocking’ chiefly in the ontological topic of the anthropological border, in man’s active relationship with the transcendent. In the concrete example given in *Očerki*, this means the spiritual practice of Hesychasm, from where the term ‘synergy’ actually derives. The accounts of unlocking in the ontical and virtual realm are incomparably less profound. In the light of this imbalance between the ‘synergetic potential’, if one may call it like that, of the three different realms, one observation has to be made explicit: The exposition of an anthropology of the border in terms of the ontological, ontical and virtual has, to a certain extent, served the purpose of legitimizing the discussion of the *one* dimension which Khoružij clearly is mostly concerned with: ontology; or, put differently, man’s transcendental horizon. Khoružij’s ‘anthropology of the border’ is, to a certain extent, a secondary reasoning to the observation of the anthropological reality of spiritual practices, more specifically to the study of Hesychasm. It is not only the latest development of his entire oeuvre, it also suggest a certain aspiration to take a step back from the very detailed analysis and study of Hesychasm and to situate it in a broader picture.

Spiritual practices, Khoružij’s implicit starting point, are phenomena which neither Cartesian metaphysics nor the post-metaphysical critique of the subject can adequately describe or explain. Scholasticism, Humanism and Enlightenment rationalism clearly had no place for spiritual and mystical practices, and counter-currents to the modernizing mainstream, such as Catholic mysticism or Romanticism, conceptualized spirituality largely as individual psychological condition. Postmodern philosophy does mark a change in this neglect of spiritual practices as social and anthropological phenomena, but there practices are mostly understood as patterns of coercion.¹⁸ Against this philosophical background, Khoružij reminds the reader that once we take the anthropological reality of spiritual practices seriously,

¹⁷ “Analiz [...]—naibolee sistematičnyj put’ poiska al’ternativy davno kritikuemoj dekartovoj koncepcii sub’ekta, put’ k otvetu na ostro stojščij v sovremennoj mysli vopros: Kto prikhodit posle sub’ekta? (This analysis [...] is the most systematic approach to a search for alternatives to the long criticized Cartesian concept of the subject, a road towards an answer to the question which contemporary thought is confronted with: *Who comes after the subject?*)” Khoružij, *Očerki*, 23.

¹⁸ Foucault (1986), 39–68.

we are inevitably led to a reconsideration of the ontological topic and of the place of religion in the anthropological discourse.

Let me clarify this last point: The idea of an unlocking of the self hinges on the conceptualization of the human subject in terms of energies. However, whether the singular human being emerges as an energetic formation—or, in words which are not Khoružij's but which clarify the idea, 'realizes his or her energetic potential'—depends on the person's free choice and on the person's capability to recognize that he or she has this choice. The former—the existential freedom of the human being—derives, in the Christian view, from the fact that man has been created in the image of God. The latter—the possibility to perceive of oneself as having that choice—depends on knowledge, education, environment, in other words, on one's being part of a tradition that is built around this understanding of the person and of its potential relationship with the Divine. In other words, the ontological topic is necessarily spelt out in terms of a religious tradition, because only a religious tradition attributes a certain way of being to the human subject *and* accounts for the potential to be otherwise. Having said this, however, a precise definition of the meaning of religious tradition in this context is necessary: Khoružij's synergetic anthropology is not a confessional discourse in the sense that he makes a specific religious postulate—he does not advocate Orthodoxy in confrontation with other theological and philosophical traditions. Nor is it a religious anthropology that derives directly from a specific religion—notwithstanding the fact that Khoružij comes from the study of Hesychasm, his conclusions are not restricted to Orthodox spirituality. As a matter of fact, it is nothing more (and nothing less) than an anthropology which preserves an independent place for religious experience in the anthropological discourse. It seems to me that, at a time when religion is becoming an ever more burning issue for politics and philosophy, Khoružij's non-confessional and practical take on the meaning of religious tradition deserves our attention.

By way of conclusion, let me read Khoružij's 'new anthropology' against the background of another 'new' take on ontology in the twentieth century. Martin Heidegger called the forgottenness of Being (*Seinsvergessenheit*) the major shortcoming of classical metaphysics. His *Fundamentalontologie* was designed as a response, but we know that Heidegger himself did not escape, in 1934 and however briefly, the temptation of re-grounding this 'new' ontology in an essentialism of the most destructive kind. I would like to suggest that Khoružij's synergetic anthropology can be read both as a commentary on Heidegger's failure and as a response to Heidegger's question. It is a commentary on the failure of totalizing a discourse inasmuch as it lays out an anthropological model in which the question of Being can be asked once again, but in which it is not asked exclusively. Khoružij conceptualizes man in pluralistic terms, as determined by a triple border, not in terms of the ontological border only. Khoružij's synergetic anthropology is a response to the Heideggerian problematic of de-essentializing the human subject¹⁹ because it looks at the person not in terms of essence, but in terms of manifestations, as energy and potentiality vis-à-vis an 'Other'. It is a response that can draw on the well-established body of thought of Orthodox theology, particularly on the

¹⁹ A task formulated most clearly by Jean-Luc Nancy. See: Nancy (2000).

distinction between essence and energy with which Gregorios Palamas sought to distance Orthodoxy from Western metaphysics. Far from the cultural agitation of so many interpreters of Orthodox theology, Khoružij invokes this intellectual tradition in the engagement with a problematic that cannot be limited to the West or to the East: the crisis of the European subject.

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