

# Solzhenitsyn and Autonomy

by Walter Kaufmann

Decidophobia provides a revealing perspective for a look at Solzhenitsyn. What I mean by decidophobia is fear of the fateful decisions that mold our future. In *Without Guilt and Justice: From Decidophobia to Autonomy* (1973)—a book dedicated to Alexander Solzhenitsyn—I have argued at length that humanity craves but dreads autonomy. Autonomy consists of making the decisions that give shape to one's life with one's eyes open to objections and alternatives. Most people are afraid of getting dizzy if they keep their eyes open at such moments, without anything to lean on, and have recourse to various strategies to avoid this frightening experience.

Some lean on religion to tell them what to do, or at least to determine what is right and wrong. Others drift along either in the *status quo*, as many middle-aged people do, or by living a life governed by caprice, like the hero, or antihero, of Camus's novel, *The Stranger*. Two further strategies consist in allegiance to a movement or a school of thought; a fifth, in exegetical thinking, which assumes that the text or tradition one interprets is right, so that one can read one's own ideas into it and get them back endowed with authority. Yet another strategy is Manichaeism, which makes much of the need for fateful decisions but stacks the cards. In effect, we are asked to choose between an evil-tasting, poisonous dish and one that tastes good and is good for our health: all good is on one side, all evil on the other, and the choice makes itself. A seventh strategy might be called moral rationalism. It claims that purely rational procedures can show us

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*Author's Note:* This article is based on my *Without Guilt and Justice: From Decidophobia to Autonomy* (New York: Peter H. Wyden, 1973). The definition of *autonomy*, the claims about its relation to intellectual integrity, and all the philosophical points in this article are developed much more fully in the book. The publisher's permission is acknowledged gratefully. The book has also been issued in paperback, as a Delta Book, by the Dell Publishing Company.

what is right and good. Another strategy is pedantry. As long as one is absorbed in microscopic choices, one is safe from fateful decisions. Obviously, these eight strategies can be combined in various ways. The ninth strategy is the faith that one is riding the wave of the future which dictates what is to be done. And the tenth, which like religion and drifting sometimes spells total relief, is marriage. One can be married or religious without becoming a decidophobe. The point is merely that marriage can be used as a strategy for avoiding ultimate responsibility for fateful decisions.

One can play all sorts of games with these ten strategies—for example, by arranging them in groups—even before adding to their number. Some of them are ways of avoiding fateful decisions; others are ways of loading the choices to make one option clearly the right one, thus eliminating all risk; while still others are ways of declining responsibility.

Another game one can play is to give people points for each strategy they use. This can be done with oneself, which is a very good idea; with people one knows; and with famous people. At some point one is apt to wonder whether it is at all possible to score zero. What is at stake, however, is no mere game. The question is whether a human being is capable of autonomy.

I think it can be shown that a few people here and there have achieved it; for example, to mention two utterly different types, Nietzsche and Eleanor Roosevelt. Both are dead. Among the living I cannot think of a finer example than Solzhenitsyn.

We do not have to read biographies of the man, nor need we pry into his personal affairs, to make a case for this claim. A large part of his life is, as it were, on the record; and anyone who wants to see the man and not merely the author can hardly do better than read *Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record*, edited by Leopold Labedz. Anyone familiar with this record will find it pathetic when students in Western countries plead that “in our society” autonomy is simply impossible. Was it any easier in the USSR, and especially in Stalin’s camps? Or is it easier in China? or in India? or in Africa? in Poland? in East Germany? Was it easier in the European Middle Ages, in the face of the Inquisition? One feels like saying with Hillel: If not now, when?

Rarely has it been more difficult for anyone to stand alone, utterly alone, without any prop of any kind, than it was for Solzhenitsyn. Yet his life has been autonomy in action. For that alone he would deserve our gratitude and admiration even if he had not written several momentous books. In an age that has produced Stalin, Hitler, and their henchmen, as well as legions of essentially mediocre men who

come close to destroying one's faith in humanity, he has shown us what man can be.

Has he also shown us by his own example how to achieve autonomy? Can we follow the path he chose? The last question seems almost absurd; but one can learn to become a good mountain climber and to overcome dizziness by initially climbing with a guide and imitating him. What one can learn from Solzhenitsyn's example, however, is that autonomy is in some ways different from climbing. The goal is not that clear at the outset, and the path to it is even less straight. Solzhenitsyn spent three and a half years in the Russian army, during World War II; then eight years in concentration camps; and then lived in exile, interrupted by two spells in a cancer ward. One could hardly prescribe that route to others.

What is exemplary, however, is his keen sense that he is a survivor—and the way in which he has dealt with it. Being a survivor generally breeds guilt feelings. Of course, we are all survivors, but most people do not think of themselves that way until someone very close to them dies. When such deaths are especially horrible or violent, and even more so when it is not only one person who dies but large numbers, and one witnesses their deaths at close range, the guilt feelings that issue from such an experience can be crippling. Solzhenitsyn had this archetypical experience three times over, each time for several years; first as an army officer at the front, then in the camps, and then in the cancer ward. Instead of being crippled by the sense that he did not deserve to live when so many had died, or trying to repress and forget as best he could his memories, he made a fateful decision that is exemplary. He decided to do with his life what nobody who had not had these horrible experiences could do. And he became a writer.

All of his writing is informed by his sense that he is a survivor—by a sense of solidarity with the dead. But his writing is never guilt-ridden or morbid. Instead of being overwhelmed by his cruel fate, he dominates his fate and makes it serve his purposes. He uses his experiences to do for humanity what, but for that fate, he could not have accomplished. This central dedication to humanity and humanness can scarcely be missed in his books. Hence *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward* are not depressing as, given the subject matter, one might expect. Chapter upon chapter bears the imprint of a strong mind with a purpose—not to moralize but to expand and sensitize the conscience of humanity. There is something here of the ethos of Sophocles and Euripides who also piled suffering upon suffering to make men and women more humane. The comparison is doubly appropriate because Solzhenitsyn shares with them the fierce intellectuality, the intense

delight in language and ideas, and the mordant wit that survives disaster.

What has here been said of Solzhenitsyn's solution of the problem of being a survivor is, of course, by no means unique with him. Other great writers have done the same thing. Nor does the point apply only to being a survivor. Few people see that guilt feelings are incompatible with autonomy; fewer still would opt for autonomy after seeing this. Just as most people dread autonomy, they are most reluctant to give up guilt feelings and try to persuade themselves and others that the alternative to guilt feelings is total amorality if not sheer wickedness, brutality, and brutishness. If you have done wrong, they feel, you ought to feel remorse. You ought to feel that you deserve punishment, suffering, retribution. But if "guilty" is defined as "deserving punishment," and "guilt feelings" as "the feeling that one deserves punishment," then it is not at all true that one cannot be humane after ceasing to think in terms of guilt, or that guilt feelings are a prerequisite of humanity. This is not the place to recapitulate long arguments against the notions of desert, justice, and guilt. Suffice it to say that the case of the survivor is paradigmatic. When a surgeon has done wrong, and it was his fault, and the harm he did someone else was avoidable, and he is responsible, it does not follow that he should feel guilty in the sense described here. On the contrary, his ability to serve humanity depends on his self-confidence. Guilt-ridden surgeons can be a menace. Far better, if a surgeon gives himself a clear account of what he did and why, and then—like the survivor—goes on to do what but for that experience he might never have been able to do. Thus he might now teach others how to avoid certain pitfalls, and he might become wiser, more humane, more sensitive. This, too, is merely a paradigm. The point applies to everything that is widely held to call for guilt feelings.

Being afraid of autonomy, which involves the resolve to consider objections and alternatives, some people question the obvious point that an autonomous person could not have followed Hitler or Stalin. If only one could taint autonomy by associating it with amoral brutes—perhaps even with Stalin and Hitler themselves—one would have a wonderful excuse for not being autonomous. In *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward* Solzhenitsyn has shown convincingly how an autonomous person could live under Stalin only in a camp or by keeping silent, how silence usually corrupts, and how this corruption spread like a disease through the whole society. The chapter on "Idols of the Market Place" in *Cancer Ward* makes this point expressly and at length.

In the West so many people are so ignorant of totalitarianism that they take it for granted that one could swallow Stalinism or Hitlerism the way one swallows any other world view. And anyone who believes that American society is just as repressive as was Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union obviously does not have the habit of examining objections and alternatives and might indeed have swallowed Nazism or Stalinism.

Of course, one could be sincere and a Nazi or a Stalinist. But nobody who made it a rule to consider objections and alternatives could have accepted Hitler's or Stalin's irrational views; and teaching students to develop an intellectual conscience and to make major decisions about their beliefs and conduct only after carefully exploring what speaks for and against various alternatives without any appeal to authority, would have been a recipe for death. One did not have to be a teacher; simply to ask such questions openly or to encourage others to become autonomous instead of simply accepting what the leader had said, was enough to become a martyr.

Few people have ever been autonomous or had the keen intellectual conscience that autonomy requires. Only those who fail to see this could possibly suppose that some of Hitler's or Stalin's followers were autonomous. The party line kept changing, and followers were required to change their views overnight, again and again and again. If they believed that whatever the leader did was best, that he knew better than anyone else, and that whatever the latest edition of the Great Encyclopaedia said was true, they could escape terrible qualms, but in that case they were decidophobes and not autonomous.

It might be objected that we cannot reasonably expect people to say, like Job: "Till I die I will not part from my integrity." In *La Force des Choses* (1963) Simone de Beauvoir, though merciless in her self-accusations, said of those who followed Stalin: "They had to live; they lived." She repudiated anyone's right to judge them. But whatever one may think about that, the point here is not to pass judgment. The point is that anyone who gave up intellectual integrity to save his life—if only to preserve himself for the sake of his family—did give it up. After all, that is one of the differences between Solzhenitsyn and millions of others: they did, and he did not. He was autonomous, and they were not.

An autonomous person decides for himself—not capriciously but by considering with his eyes open what speaks for and against alternatives. Now it might still be asked whether a person might not decide after weighing the pros and cons to join "the Party." He might; just as a person might decide to go to a surgeon and ask him: Please—I can't take it any more—give me a frontal lobotomy! Those who decide to

commit themselves in such a way that henceforth they will never have to face fateful decisions any more are decidophobes and not autonomous. And those who abandon or sacrifice their intellectual integrity cannot be said to have retained it.

The Nazis and Stalin, of course, understood this very well and realized that there was no place in their societies for autonomous human beings. The Germans had a name for their principle; they called it the *Führerprinzip*, the leadership principle. Rudolf Hoess, the commanding officer of Auschwitz gave a good account of it in his autobiography. His definition: "Every German had to submit unconditionally and uncritically to the leadership of the state"; and this involved "surrender of one's own will." In the same vein he spoke of Himmler, "whose orders, whose utterances had been gospel for me," and called him "the most extreme representative of the *Führerprinzip*." Another revealing remark is this: "After such talks with Eichmann humane feelings almost seemed to me treason against the *Führer*."

Hitler himself, of course, was not autonomous either. He was not only singularly dishonest but also quite lacked the habit of subjecting his irrational convictions to critical examination. He was the type Sartre has described in his portrait of the anti-Semite (English in my *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*), and Eric Hoffer in *The True Believer*. He could not tolerate disagreement and in the end became more and more interested in astrology.

As for Stalin, the classical portrait of the man is Solzhenitsyn's in *The First Circle*. Plato had argued long ago in his *Republic* that the despot was not a free man but at heart a slave, and he had argued elsewhere that Socrates was a free man even in prison. Solzhenitsyn has developed both points at length and lent substance to the claim about the despot. Some have called his portrait of Stalin a caricature. I am in no position to judge its historical accuracy, but the portrait rings true. It is a *tour de force* of genius and should not be dissociated altogether from its context. What Solzhenitsyn shows compellingly—and what is surely true—is that at each echelon in a totalitarian state one looks up to someone higher in the system who has one's own fate in his hands and looks autonomous; but in fact they are all unfree, all in terror, all, depending on one's point of view, either pathetic or contemptible, and in the last analysis both.

The wretched film based on *The First Circle* caught at least a little of this point but quite missed its counterpart. In the film only one prisoner stood up to the authorities with defiant autonomy, suggesting that it takes an almost superhuman hero to do that. In the book the scenes that were merged in the film are distributed over several men, and there is no suggestion whatsoever that they are superhuman

heroes. Solzhenitsyn suggests forcibly that simple people can have and sometimes do have the requisite integrity.

This does not mean that it is easy to be autonomous, but Solzhenitsyn sometimes suggests that it was easier in the camps than outside. This looks paradoxical, but basically the reason is the same why it was easier for Jews than Gentiles to be autonomous in Nazi Germany. What was needed was a thoroughgoing rejection of the authority of those in power, an uncompromising refusal to accept their views uncritically, a raw independence of judgment. To maintain that stance as long as one had a job somewhere in the system was more difficult by far than it was for those who were, beyond doubt, outsiders.

One of Solzhenitsyn's major novels, *August 1914*, may seem to bear little or no relation to our theme, but in fact those who have written about this novel have missed much of its thrust, and our perspective may make possible a better understanding of it. I began by listing ten strategies of decidophobia, and one was the belief that one rides the wave of the future. In 1940 Anne Morrow Lindbergh published a short book called *The Wave of the Future*, defending an isolationist position. "The wave of the future is coming and there is no fighting it," she said (p. 37). But those who claim to discern the future are often wrong; and an autonomous person might well say: even if this should be the wave of the future, I choose to go down fighting it.

Sartre among many others has called Marxism "the philosophy of our time" and evidently felt that this endowed it with some special authority.<sup>1</sup> If any particular world view were "the philosophy of our time" many people would feel that it was no longer necessary to examine alternatives and what speaks for and against each. For similar reasons, people turn to astrology, oracles, the Chinese *I Ching*, to help them decide what to do—or to find out what will happen anyway, regardless of what we do. Millions find it frightening to face up to the lack of necessity in human affairs.

For the Soviet Writers' Secretariat, which considered Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* unpublishable as written—they were generous with offers to help him rewrite it!—one of the major provocations was the concluding image of the novel: "An evil man threw tobacco in the Macaque Rhesus's eyes. Just like that. . . ." The provocation was not merely that Stalin was likened to an evil man, but that the author

<sup>1</sup> In the opening pages of his *Critique*; i.e., at the beginning of *Search for a Method*. In context, this is a plea for exegetical thinking, as defined in the second paragraph of this essay.

implicitly denied the Marxist philosophy of history and insisted on the element of caprice in human affairs. One does not have to be a member of the Soviet Writers' Secretariat to be dazzled by the thought that what some individual decides "just like that" might determine the misery and death of millions. To avoid this dizziness, people have always found it tempting to believe in a divine government, the stars, or "History."

Solzhenitsyn's opposition to all forms of historical determinism is central in his *August 1914*. Here he develops a view of history that stands squarely opposed to Marxism and to that "Tolstoyan philosophy, with its 'worship of passive sanctity and meekness of simple, ordinary people'" which one of his Soviet detractors had found in his early work. For obvious reasons, the polemic against Marxism is not formulated explicitly, but Tolstoy's ideas about history are rejected expressly. The subtlety and richness of this novel cannot be discussed here, but the points that bear on autonomy can be stated succinctly.

In the first part of *August 1914* the author shows how decrepit, obsolete, and hopeless the Tsar's army was. Soon one feels that there is no need to go on in this vein; the disastrous Russian defeat at Tannenberg was overdetermined, and any one or two of the endless reasons mentioned would have been enough. The reader is led to feel that it did not require the superlative efficiency and technological superiority of the German army to defeat such a wretched force. But then Solzhenitsyn tries to show that if the celebrated German victors, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, had been obeyed, the Russian army would *not* have been encircled and destroyed: the shattering Russian defeat was accomplished by two German generals who disobeyed orders. And the Russian officers who defied *their* stupid orders and fought courageously inflicted serious defeats on the Germans and broke through the encirclement. Solzhenitsyn calls upon his readers to reject the false faith in the wave of the future and to make decisions for themselves, fearlessly.<sup>2</sup>

Yet Solzhenitsyn is far from feeling contempt for those who lack the rare qualities required for successful insubordination and autonomy. His compassion for the sufferings of the less gifted sears the heart. In *August 1914* his sympathetic portrayal of General Samsonov, the commander of the encircled Russian army, becomes one of the glories of world literature precisely when we are shown how a severely limited man dies from the inside out, how despair and death permeate his

<sup>2</sup> Even if Solzhenitsyn is mistaken about the date when Hindenburg and Ludendorff took charge, and the orders in question were actually given by their predecessors, the philosophical point remains untouched.



body. Had Samsonov been more independent, defying his orders, he might have avoided defeat and failure; but he had some sense of decency, courage enough to wish to die with his troops and, when that proved impossible, to commit suicide—and he did not tell lies.

Solzhenitsyn's hatred of dishonesty is a physical thing and finds superlative expression in the overwhelming final scene of the book, in which a colonel simply cannot keep quiet even though his explosion may not do any good and is almost certain to ruin him. Nothing in Solzhenitsyn's works is more obviously autobiographical than the description of the feelings of this man. But the same passion for honesty finds succinct expression in an aside in the early story, "Matryona's House": "There was nothing evil about either the mice or the cockroaches, they told no lies."

Autonomy does not entail any "elitist" scorn for simple folk. But it does require courage and high standards of honesty. And it precludes any deference to the wave of the future.

Autonomy is not enough, and there is much more to Solzhenitsyn than autonomy. I have here confined myself to a single theme. But in conclusion I should like to cite one passage from *Cancer Ward* that may lend a little more depth to this all too brief discussion by suggesting another dimension. The passage points to a central motive in Solzhenitsyn's work.

It comes in a discussion between Kostoglotov and a poor woman. It is tempting to quote much of it, but I shall confine myself to the main point. She says:

School children write compositions: On the Unhappy, Tragic . . . Life of Anna Karenina. But was Anna really unhappy? She chose passion—and paid for passion, that's happiness! She was free and proud! But what if, in peacetime, men in caps and overcoats come into the house where you were born, where you've lived all your life, and order the whole family to leave the house and the city in twenty-four hours, taking only what your weak hands can carry? . . . and your little daughter in a hair-ribbon sits down to play Mozart for the last time, but bursts out crying and runs away,—why should I re-read *Anna Karenina*? Maybe I've suffered enough? Where can I read about us, about us?

And although she had almost begun to shout, still her training by many years of terror did not desert her: she was not shouting; it was not a real shout. Indeed, it was only Kostoglotov who heard her.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, chap. 34, translated by the editor. The corresponding passage may be found on p. 479 of the translation of the novel by Nicholas Bethell and David Burg (New York: Bantam Books, 1969).

It is easy to imagine that someone really spoke this way to Solzhenitsyn. In any case, that is a large part of the burden of his authorship—to write about millions of people whose suffering has remained mute and not reached the ears of the world—millions who have suffered and died under Stalin and Hitler and elsewhere, legions who are still suffering.

In the early fifties Sartre and many others in France were arguing about two seemingly unrelated questions: whether it was permissible to admit that there were camps in the Soviet Union, and whether the novel was dead. At one blow, Solzhenitsyn made these debates ridiculous. Instead of inquiring what might be the artistic form of our time or the wave of the future, he found people crying out to be heard; but as in a nightmare “it wasn’t a real shout” and the only one who heard was he. He gave their suffering a voice. That was what mattered, the humanity of it. But to do that required courage, independence, taking his own counsel, pitting his autonomous self against a vast and all but omnipotent system. Being autonomous, he did not simply use old forms; he made innovations; but all that was incidental, and to concentrate mainly on that would have been vanity. What was crucial was that he should no longer be the only one who heard the voice.

Perhaps one must really understand that woman, as one cannot understand her simply on the basis of a brief quotation, to love Solzhenitsyn and to understand his work.