Thinking in Dark Times: Life, Death, and Social Solidarity

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In this article, Volodymyr Yermolenko examines the power of ideas to shape social and political events. He is particularly interested in the way misguided or false ideas about Russian and Ukrainian history and politics have contributed to the current Russia-Ukraine war. He also reflects on the way this war has transformed his understanding of some key philosophical concepts, including life, death, and social solidarity.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, war, evil, crisis, life, death, solidarity

This lecture was delivered as part of a benefit conference for the Ukrainian academy that Aaron James Wendland organized in March 2023 at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto.[1] The benefit conference was designed to provide financial support for academic and civic initiatives at Kyiv Mohyla Academy and thereby counteract the destabilizing impact that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had on Ukrainian higher education and civilian life. The lecture has been lightly edited for the purpose of publication in *Studia Philosophica Estonica* and the original presentation can be found on the Munk School's YouTube channel under the heading: "What Good is Philosophy?—A Benefit Conference for Ukraine."[2]

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Aaron James Wendland: It is an honor to introduce Volodymyr Yermolenko. Volodymyr is a Ukrainian philosopher, journalist, and writer. He is the Pres-

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[1] For details more details about this benefit conference, see: https://civic.ukma.edu.ua/benefit/.

[2] For an archive of the lectures, see: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBoanhrBnRErZb1Xoh_BzrH4iaLw9Q6HX&si=IXawYDGA5jP-L5Ua.

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ident of PEN Ukraine, the analytics director at Internews Ukraine, one of the largest and oldest Ukrainian media NGOs, and the editor-in-chief of UkraineWorld.org, a multimedia project in English about Ukraine. He is also an Associate Professor at Kyiv Mohyla Academy, and he has written numerous articles in various Ukrainian and international media outlets, including *The Economist*, *Le Monde*, *The Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, and *Newsweek*. His texts and interviews have been published in Ukrainian, English, French, German, Polish, Italian, Russian, Dutch, Norwegian, Czech, Greek, Chinese, and a host of other languages.

Volodymyr Yermolenko: It's a great pleasure to be with you, Aaron. I also think it is a great idea to organize conference to support Ukrainian academic life in Ukraine, because we understand that many Ukrainian academics are abroad and get support abroad, but there is a very big need to support Ukrainian academics inside Ukraine. Many of my colleagues from the academy are actually on the front line. Some of them are not with us anymore. They passed away; they were killed by the Russian troops. This is the reality in which we are living, and we should understand this reality.

The topic of my speech is: What is it like thinking in the dark times? What does it mean? It is an echo of the podcast series that I have launched within our podcast, *Explaining Ukraine*, which is one the widest listened-to podcast in English about Ukraine. And the idea was to not stop thinking, even during these dark times.

When I shared this idea once with Marci Shore, a professor at Yale University, she asked: "Does it refer to Hannah Arendt's book, *Men in Dark Times*?" I said: "Yeah, I hadn't thought about this". But there is indeed a reference to it: there is a parallel between our time and the time of Hannah Arendt's reflections.

For me personally, the idea of light is very interesting and very important, and the idea of darkness as well. I do think that different epochs and different times have certain relations to light and darkness. We can say that there are some epochs like the Renaissance or Enlightenment or the second half of the 20th century, which were infused with the idea of light, transparency, and open space, an open perspective through which we are bringing everything to light. We have this notion that light is a norm and darkness is a deviation.

But there are other epochs, like the Baroque period in the 17th century or Romanticism in the 19th century, in which the reflection starts from the opposite idea. It starts from the idea that darkness is our norm and that light is an exception. Light is something that which rarely appears, and which can go away very quickly, so we should cherish it.

One of the metaphors of this is found in Baroque painting: the chiaroscuro painting of Caravaggio, of Rembrandt, of van Honthorst, of Georges de La Tour. There is something in the emotion of this chiaroscuro: light emerging from and contrasting sharply with darkness. It is not just a technique of painting. There is some emotion in this which says that light is a rarity. Light is a deficit. We actually start with the darkness. And inside the darkness, we start thinking.

Of course, this kind of thinking comes during difficult times. We understand how difficult the 16th and 17th centuries were for Europe, or the early 19th century, or for that matter the European years in the early 20th century, where we can also doubt that light is the norm.

My first book in Ukrainian, for example, was dedicated to Walter Benjamin. I knew that there was something in Benjamin that went beyond the interpretation of him that was popular at the time. That interpretation was very postmodernist. The interpretation was: "Let's look at Walter Benjamin as kind of a first deconstructionist, Derrida before Derrida". I thought there was something wrong with this because Benjamin was, for me, a Baroque thinker, a thinker of those years, of chiaroscuro, where he actually considers truth as a deficit, as a rarity, as a kind of enlightening through the darkness.

I think this is important and we should not overlook it, because many influential thinkers actually start thinking in dark times. We should probably think about Descartes as a baroque philosopher who actually says: "Look, we are in darkness, we are deceived by an evil genius, a bad spirit who plays with us". So, we don't know what the right path is to take and therefore we have to invent a method to get us out of this place. And suddenly, we realize that the origins of Descartes" rationalist philosophy are actually much more existential than we used to think.

That said, I do think that there is something happening in Ukraine right now which we should pay attention to: this experience of facing a war, facing the fragility of life, and facing death, which is very painful, but at the same time it might be the origin of thinking, literature, poetry, and art.

The poetry which is now produced by Ukrainian poets is incredible. Many people, like Serhii Zhadan or Halyna Kruk or Kateryna Kalytko or Kateryna Babkina or Julia Musakovska or Pavlo Korobchuk or Svitlana Povalyaeva give us very strong poetry. This is poetry, because it's much more than poetry. It's strong literature, because it's much more than literature, because it's much more than just work with words. It goes beyond that. It's existential.

I hope the current epoch will also give us some impetus for new thinking, new reflection, and new philosophy. I keep thinking about the basic concepts of philosophy and thinking. I hope that this period will also pro-

duce something new in the Ukrainian philosophy, as well, and maybe it is already producing it…

I also believe that the current time, the time of war, shows how important ideas are. I agree with Tim Snyder, who repeatedly says that one of the causes of this war is bad ideas. I think we underestimate how bad ideas can actually kill people and how morally bad ideas can kill people. They are not innocent at all. They are not just words. So, the idea, for example, that Russia is an empire that needs to expand, that Ukraine is a non-existent state, that the past of Ukraine is actually the past of Russia; that the history of Ukraine is actually the history of Russia, is a bad idea. It's made by bad historians. But when bad history turns into ideology, it turns into a weapon. Once you say that Ukraine does not exist or does not have a right to exist, the next step is to say: "Okay, we should eliminate the idea of Ukraine and all the people who hold this idea". And this is a direct step to genocide which is happening right now. So, I do think that ideas play a big role in our lives and in our history. Ideas persist, they go beyond the material reality of our daily existence. And therefore, we should be very attentive to ideas.

I do think that there has been some kind of devaluation of ideas in the past decades, both in Eastern Europe and in the Western World. This may have something to do with postmodernism; or at least with a certain relativization of ideas, with the thought that ideas are interchangeable, that one idea can replace another one. I think it is profoundly wrong. And again, we should really pay attention to the power of ideas.

For the purpose of this lecture, I have been thinking about how the current situation leads us to rethink many things. I will try to develop some of them here. I will try to share some thoughts I have about words and concepts that we are accustomed to and that I have been rethinking since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

First, one key thing we need to rethink is our idea of life. Life has become, particularly during peaceful times, something banal. But during war, when you're facing death, when death is no longer an abstract word, you understand how fragile life is, how fragile the society is, how fragile our physical bodies are, how fragile our culture is, how everything can be undone very quickly, and how people who believe in the inevitable progress of history are wrong. Seeing these things are key. Of course, war is an absolute evil. But when you have no choice but to face the war, to face death and destruction, you kind of see how you can cherish life in a new way; how you can value living beings in a new way.

One example of this for me is the attention Ukrainians now pay to the life of each person, and not just living people. We see an enormous amount of ritual around our dead soldiers. This change dates from as early as Euro-

maidan. We see these ceremonies when a village is bearing their dead, every dweller in the village goes on the street and goes with this person. Recently, when we have famous people and famous heroes killed, we see all the social networks talk about these people. Yesterday there was the death of a very prominent and very young Ukrainian soldier, an officer with the nickname DaVinci, and the whole of Ukraine was talking about it. Life is very fragile. But at the same time, it's very much cherished.

I have just returned from Nikopol, a town located six kilometers from the Russian troops, near the famous Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the biggest in Europe, which is occupied by the Russians. I met a woman called Olena, who is taking care of the shelter for dogs, for pets. There are about 250 pets that she is taking care of despite regular shelling by the Russian army, despite the danger of a major nuclear disaster six kilometers from her. These are repetitive stories. We see over and over again how people in these difficult times actually care. They care for life well beyond humans. And I think this is very important.

Another reflection on life is that life as a biological fact is not full if it's not filled with sense, with meaning, with values, for example, with the value of freedom. As the famous Ukrainian paramedic, Tyra, who spent a lot of time in Russian captivity, recently said: "Life without freedom doesn't matter". This brings us back to the old idea of dignity. If we go back to the idea of dignity in Roman times, we understand that dignity is the continuation of Life Beyond Life. It's something which is not material, which goes beyond your biology, but which you cherish no less than your biological life or even more than your biological life.

One of the stories Ukraine is discussing right now is the story of a Ukrainian soldier, a Ukrainian prisoner of war, who was told by Russian soldiers to dig his own grave and then take away the Ukrainian symbols from his uniform. He refused to do it. He said, "Glory to Ukraine", and he was shot down at the very moment. This dignity, this idea that you're not afraid of saying "Glory to Ukraine" when you're facing the enemy who is ready to kill you, this is something really incredible. This is when the word dignity becomes very practical and very material.

A second idea that we need to rethink is that of death. Death is not a metaphor. Death is not just a word. It was kind of sick to see how the word "death" became popular in the 20th century. We talked about the death of culture, the death of modernity, the death of idealism, the death of metaphysics, and in all this we kind of played with the word death. I think death became less scary for us. It became something very far away with which we can play. But for Ukrainians right now, death is not an abstract word: it's a physical death, it's a real death, it's a void that you feel when your close

people die, when your husbands die, when your kids die, when your parents die, when your friends die.

The third idea that we need to think more deeply about is evil. And not just about evil with all the concepts around it, like the banality of evil, or something like that. Actually, Arendt's ideas about the banality of evil are confirmed by this war. But at the same time, I think, we can go beyond that. What is important is that the evil that we are facing right now in Ukraine is not just evil: it's a repetitive evil; it's an evil that was not condemned; it's an evil that was not judged; it's an evil that was not punished; it's an evil that enjoys its impunity. And I think this impunity creates a kind of vicious circle of evil. So, we need to think about the power evil enjoys when it is not punished, because it gives evil people the power to say: "Look, I am a new norm. I am not a killer; I am a judge". This is what happens in Russia, in the Soviet Union. If we think about who Putin is, he is the heir of those killers within the KGB, killing people without any trials in the 30s, 40s, 50s, etc.

The fourth idea that we need to take seriously is the notion that society is very important. We probably entered a period in developed democracies in which we have the illusion that we can all do it by ourselves. We are living increasingly in an atomistic society, where we believe that an individual can do everything. We don't need other people. Even if you're playing music, you don't need other players or other instruments, you can do everything on your computer. You can play video games by yourself; you can do everything by yourself. This is an illusion.

Society may be less visible, but we all depend on our societies, we all depend on other people. We are wearing clothes, which other people made. We are reading books, which other people have written. We are using goods, which other people have produced. And if you remove that, if you remove this society, we will be helpless, we will not even be Robinson Crusoe, because we will not have those habits of survival. I think we tend to forget about this in this age of atomization. War actually brings you back to this notion that we can cherish our individual freedoms, we can cherish our individualities, but we are all connected to a wider network. And we will not survive without this network. And this network will not survive without us.

So, one of the lessons that we Ukrainians have learned from this war is that we will not survive without our society and our society will not survive without us, without our individual responsibility. We are all so intertwined, and I think this idea gives you simultaneously a sense of responsibility and modesty. You understand that your effort, however important it might be, is just a drop in the ocean. And if there are no other drops, there is no ocean.

The final point I want to make in this lecture is kind of connected with the first idea I mentioned. This war is of course a question of humanity. But

at the same time, it's a question of going beyond humanity. It's also a war which leads us to think about life in wider terms. Humans are not the only ones suffering from this war. Animals are suffering, ecosystems are suffering. In many aspects, what Russia is doing is not only a genocide but also an ecocide. Look at how they set fire to Ukrainian fields, how they destroy our ecosystems in the South, which are so important for global food. We travel through Ukraine and we see these fields in which harvests were not collected because of the Russian invasion. We understand how long this supply chain is. And from the fact that the harvest was not collected last year, we realize that there are people all around the world who may face hunger or famine.

This means we need to see the planet as a single organism in which everything depends on everything else, and in which, when we think about ethics of life, we should think beyond humans. That doesn't mean we should devalue humans, but we should understand that maybe one of the key ethical revolutions of the 21st century will be a revolution in which we extend the idea of dignity from humans to other living beings, to nature as such.

I think Ukrainians have an implicit understanding of this idea, due to the impact of colonization and modernization. Death and famine were the result of Soviet colonization and industrial policy in the 1930s, for example. And it's clear that we are suffering from Russia's colonial aspirations and destructive technology today. So, I do think that the Ukrainian experience, including our experience of this war, can help us rethink our relation to nature as well.

AJW: Thanks so much for an excellent talk, Volodymyr, and for sharing your insights from the ground in Kyiv. I would like to circle back to the beginning of your lecture and the themes you started with, namely, darkness and light. You suggested that darkness is a catalyst for thinking, and I wonder if philosophy is a way out of that darkness? Put otherwise, if darkness is the result of bad ideas, I wonder if you see philosophy and the work you and other Ukrainian philosophers are doing in these circumstances as a way to combat these bad ideas and get out of this darkness?

VY: I don't think it is philosophy per se that leads us out of darkness. I think it is a matter of individual effort and individual responsibility. It's not philosophers who are killing the Russian occupiers. It's our brave soldiers. Some of these soldiers are also philosophers or poets or cinema makers, but we should not be utopian about this. At some point, society has to become a society of soldiers or people who help soldiers. I think that is where we are at in this war.

But I would say that philosophy can counter bad ideas, for example, the idea that individuals don't matter. We actually see this idea in some of the work of some philosophers, primarily in the Russian intellectual tradition, which is now popular in Russia, people like Ilyin, or Solovyov, or the Eurasianists, they all deny the role of the individual. They all deny the question of freedom. They instead say that there is something bigger than the individual and that you should be governed by it. When you start thinking in this way, you end up with to something very terrible: totalitarianism. When you say that individuals don't matter, individual lives don't matter. And we can see the consequences of this idea in Russia today, and we really do need to understand how practical and dangerous ideas can be.

One of the leitmotifs of discussions in Ukraine since the war began in 2014 is whether ideas can kill people and whether words can kill people. I do think that ideas can kill people. This means philosophy is not something rather abstract and rather remote, and I do think that thinking in dark times can open the way for a much sober look at reality. When you start from darkness, you don't have an illusion that everything is bright, everything is okay, everything is clean, that the light is the norm. Instead, you start from the idea that the darkness is the norm, that suffering is the norm, that pain is the norm. People who come from very difficult backgrounds, and difficult experiences, usually understand life much better because they understand where the pain comes from.

For example, when you look at the end of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, we see a new figure in literature, which is the figure of a servant. We see in modern literature, where the key character is not one person, but two. You have Don Quixote, when there are two characters, you have Robinson Crusoe, you have Don Juan, you have Faust, etc. There are two characters. Or one character is divided into two and becomes a double of himself. The second character is like a shadow of the first and is a servant, like Sancho Panza. And then at a certain moment, the servant comes to the fore, like Figaro, or Jacques Le Fataliste in Diderot. The servant becomes a major character. Why is that? Well, there is a certain belief that the servant understands life better than his master, because he knows the dark side of life, the suffering, the disrespect, the material hardships, etc. This notion was developed by Hegel, but in a bad way, because Marx went on to developed it in his way, and then we had another totalitarian thought in which only the servant and only the proletariat knows the truth of life. And then we had all the tragic consequences of this bad idea.

But I still believe that the initial idea is correct: that there is some value in the darkness. It doesn't mean that we need to strive for darkness, or that we need to seek the reality of suffering. No, because if we say that, we are

very close to the type of thinking that is characteristic of totalitarianism. But if we are faced with darkness, then we need to realize that there is something we may better understand about life than if we were just sitting in a chair and reading books and enjoying the cinema.