Utopia, Dystopia, and Democracy: Teaching Philosophy in Wartime Ukraine

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In this essay we explore a variety of instrumental and intrinsic values associated with teaching philosophy in wartime Ukraine. Duclos, an American, argues that teaching philosophy in Ukraine can cultivate habits of thought and action that promote democratic citizenship while opposing authoritarian dogmatism. Duclos further argues that the intrinsic joy associated with philosophical activity should not be overlooked, even in times of crisis. Conscious of Ukraine's Soviet past, Bila, a Ukrainian, cautions against using philosophers and philosophy departments as an ideological arm of any political party. She then argues that philosophy has value as a distinct form of thinking with the power to provide consolation. Finally, she identifies philosophical activity as agent of creative change. To teach philosophy in wartime Ukraine is to advance these instrumental and intrinsic values with an eye towards influencing the Ukrainian society that will emerge after the war.

Keywords: teaching, value of philosophy, democracy, authoritarianism, reasons, creativity, consolation

1. Introduction

Why teach philosophy in wartime Ukraine? It's a fair question. It's a necessary question. Given the variety and gravity of Ukraine's urgent needs, few will think to themselves: "But what about philosophy? Is Ukraine getting enough philosophy?" As two scholars committed to teaching philosophy in wartime Ukraine—one American, one Ukrainian—we believe an explanation is in order.

Philosophers sometimes take a defensive stance when the value of their activity is called into question. Like other disciplines that bake no bread, philosophy is perpetually engaged in legitimizing itself to students, dubious

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deans, and skeptical trustees. At all but the most well-endowed universities, there is perennial pressure on philosophers to justify the existence of their positions and departments. Yet a discipline that prides itself on questioning fundamental assumptions about reality, knowledge, and goodness has no right to be dismissive or dogmatic when it comes time to question itself. There is a duty to consider not just the role of philosophy in times of crisis, but the role of philosophy in the time of *this* crisis.

It will not do to proudly claim that the unexamined life is not worth living. That bit of Socratic wisdom strikes a sour note when voiced with air raid sirens in the background. Philosophy should have a positive role in this crisis, and those teaching philosophy should be able to say what it is. In this article, we independently discuss our distinct, though related, motivations for teaching philosophy in wartime Ukraine and how we understand the value of our activity.[1]

2. Joshua Duclos

During the Covid-19 pandemic, philosophers made an effort to show that philosophy can be useful in times of crisis. We were reminded that philosophy can help us accept what we cannot change (Epictetus); that it can encourage us to embrace the absurdity of our struggle (Camus); that it can show us how to find wisdom in great suffering (Schopenhauer and Nietzsche).[2] Perhaps philosophy-as-coping-mechanism made sense during Covid, but this is not the primary reason to teach philosophy in wartime Ukraine, nor is it the most important.

Teaching philosophy during this crisis has a positive function. The function is both personal and political. With its focus on clear arguments and meaningful distinctions, philosophy has a distinctive ability to cultivate habits of thought and action that are constitutive of free individuals, and free individuals are constitutive of a free society. Teaching philosophy will not end the war, but it will influence the world that emerges after the peace.

I will first discuss how I came to teach philosophy in Ukraine, the nature of my work, and why I felt the need to articulate this work's value. I will then focus on the instrumental value of teaching philosophy by suggesting five

[1] Some reflections in this essay are drawn from a seminar that we co-taught at Ukrainian Catholic University in March 2024. The seminar—"Utopia, Dystopia, and Democracy"—was free and open to undergraduate and graduate students from any university in Lviv. Students engaged contemporary democratic theorists, including Amy Gutmann, Michael Sandel, David Estlund, Jason Brennan, and Adam Swift. They studied Arendt's *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*. And after exploring the history of utopian ideology, they reconsidered the social visions in Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

[2] For example, see (Masure 2020 and Weiner 2020).

ways that philosophy can help cultivate the social, moral, and intellectual virtues required of citizens in a healthy democracy. Finally, I will conclude my portion of the essay with a few reflections on the intrinsic value of philosophy.

2.1 On choosing to teach philosophy in Ukraine

Shortly after Russia launched a "special military operation" that looked suspiciously like an invasion, I flew to Prague to help resettle Ukrainian refugees. I used to live in the Czech Republic, and I hoped my knowledge of the language and the country would prove useful for those arriving with little money and no contacts. I did what I could before heading home to resume my job as a teacher of philosophy.

The news from Ukraine that spring was grim. I found myself experiencing waves of regret for not having done more. Regret and also guilt. Some of the guilt coalesced around my job. This was a time of crisis—crisis for Ukraine and crisis for the world. And what was I doing? Explaining *modus tollens* and reading Plato's *Laches* with comfortable students on a leafy New England campus. Work of which I had always been proud was tinged with shame. I could volunteer as a medic! Or become a translator! Or write stunning op-eds for the *Wall Street Journal* that stir others to action!

This was 3 a.m. thinking at its finest. I have no medical training. My language skills are poor. And the *Wall Street Journal* has sharper pens than mine to make the case for Ukraine. My thoughts turned back to philosophy.

I went to Ukraine in August 2022 as a volunteer teacher of philosophy. I repeated the trip in March 2023 and again in March 2024. During this time, I worked at three universities and one language school, lecturing and leading seminars on a variety of topics: early analytic ethics, Cartesian doubt, Pascal's theology, Aristotelian metaphysics, democratic theory, and environmental philosophy. Except for a few retreats to underground shelters, these were delightfully normal classes full of the questions, confusions, and moments of wonder that are the hallmark of eager students the world over.

The need to articulate the value of teaching philosophy in wartime Ukraine manifested before my first trip. I had supposed that support for Ukraine would be a non-partisan issue, or at least a bipartisan issue. Not entirely so.

Some on the Right accused me of being a globalist stooge. Didn't I know that NATO was threatening Russia? A few conceded that Putin might be going too far, but someone had to stand up to the EU and progressivism run amok. Not to be outdone, some on the Left told me I was "overvaluing white pain." What's more, they suggested that by supporting Ukraine I was

complicit in neo-imperialism. Didn't I know America's track record in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean? And what about Iraq?

It seemed that the attack on Ukraine had breathed new life into the horseshoe theory of politics.[3] These leftwing/rightwing objections didn't deter me. But they did prompt me to: (a) explain myself, and (b) explain myself in a way that did not depend on political axioms of the Right or the Left. I wanted reasons that could, and perhaps should, be acceptable to anyone regardless of prior intellectual commitments: public reasons in the Rawlsian sense.[4]

The general reason to support Ukraine is simple: opposition to thuggish authoritarianism. Any group willing to institutionalize murder, rape, theft, and historical fantasy to achieve political ends should be resisted, and those bearing the burden of resistance should be supported. There are, of course, deeper geopolitical reasons for wishing Ukraine battlefield success, like the preservation of the international legal order and the deterrence of similar invasions by other despots in other places. These deeper reasons have been articulated by scholars like Timothy Snyder, journalists like Rich Lowry, and politicians like Olaf Scholz and Mitt Romney—to name just a few—that there is little I can add.[5] We might charitably accept that some who remain implacably opposed to aiding Ukraine are motivated by pacifism, a reasonable fear of escalation, or a desire to spare Ukraine further destruction. Increasingly, however, many who continue to question the moral and prudential value of Western support for Ukraine appear motivated by a barely concealed admiration for authoritarian strongmen. This would certainly account for Tucker Carlson.[6]

2.2 Building a culture of philosophy

Opposition to authoritarianism explains support for Ukraine, generally. But it also explains the value of supporting Ukraine by teaching philosophy, specifically.

Teaching philosophy builds a culture of philosophy, and a culture of philosophy is anathema to authoritarianism. By "culture of philosophy" I don't mean a society that makes Wittgenstein and Heidegger required reading. I mean a culture that asks us to be more critical and less dogmatic. A culture that privileges attention to arguments over assertions. A culture distinguished by a respect for reality, the desire for consistency, and a willingness

[3] See (Dutkiewicz and Stecuła 2022).

[4] See (Rawls 1993, 162, 167 and Rawls 1997, 786).

[5] See (Lowry 2024, Romney 2024, Snyder 2022, Scholz 2024). That support for Ukraine has been urged by figures as politically diverse as these four is worth noting.

[6] See (Coen 2024 and Scarr 2024).

to humbly participate in a community of inquiry that transcends time and place and is always open to revision in the face of new evidence. While a culture of philosophy is not always adequately realized in liberal societies, it is non-existent in illiberal, authoritarian regimes.

Here are five ways in which teaching philosophy can help cultivate the personal dispositions necessary for free citizens in a free, post-war Ukraine.

2.2.1 Respect for reasons

Discourse theories of democracy remind us that democratic citizenship involves more than just voting. A proper ethic of citizenship requires the free exchange of reasons for the political positions we take. We have a duty not merely to engage in the decision-making process, but to reason with fellow citizens in ways that are publicly accessible. In this way, we can come to understand ourselves as authors of the laws we are subject to, and democracy becomes something greater than tyranny of the majority.[7]

If philosophy does anything, it teaches respect for reasons. What's the difference between disagreement and philosophical disagreement? Disagreement is the statement of an opposing view; philosophical disagreement is the statement of reasons for holding an opposing view, ideally coupled with a charitable reconstruction of your opponent's reasons and an explanation of why you think they might be mistaken. You may think that Leibniz's monads capture the nature of reality better than Carnap's physicalism; I may disagree. But until we exchange reasons we are not doing philosophy. To the extent that philosophy is built on the charitable exchange of reasons, it prepares citizens to charitably exchange reasons in the public political sphere.

2.2.2 Respect for reasonable disagreement

In addition to teaching us how to reason and habituating us to an ethic of reasonableness, philosophy teaches us that reasonable disagreement is possible. Aristotle disagreed with Plato. Mengxi disagreed with Xunzi. Anscombe disagreed with de Beauvoir. If the disagreements between these luminaries are philosophically interesting, it is because they are based on reasons rather than prejudice and emotion.

Unless competing visions of the Good are forcefully stamped out (as they are in totalitarian regimes), democratic citizenship will most likely require negotiating with those with whom we profoundly disagree. As Madison observed in Federalist 10, democracy tends towards factionalism (Madison 1787). The prospect of factions in society is alarming to those who see disagreement as a fatal societal flaw. For those who see themselves as simply

[7] See (Habermas 1998 and Baxter 2011).

right and their opponents as simply wrong, a system that breeds and tolerates disagreement is to be feared. It is a bad system.

Philosophy teaches us otherwise. The scope of reasonable disagreement about even the most fundamental issues is vast, even if it is not limitless. Despite intense disagreements about the nature of justice, John Rawls and Robert Nozick were able to work productively in the same philosophy department for decades because, as philosophers, they respected reasons and saw the value of reasonable disagreement. Even if we aspire to a society in which all people leave the Cave, behold the Forms, and unite Truth and Beauty in a single vision, accepting reasonable disagreement is the best way to advance towards this end. After all, we can't be confident that we are right, and may remain deluded if we are wrong, unless we others disagree with us—reasonably.

2.2.3 Practicing civic virtue

Political virtues can be cultivated through intentional class design. For example: ask students to analyze and evaluate Arendt's claims about the role of the masses in totalitarian systems, and state that your only role is to moderate discussion. This allows students-citizens to take responsibility for their education and that of their peers. It requires them to practice speaking and listening. They learn to share insights, dissent with respect, and advance towards a common goal even if collective agreement is elusive. In short, they find themselves acting out some of the features of an engaged citizenry that they are reading about in Arendt, and perhaps experiencing the threat that free thinking poses to the mass control that they are discussing.

2.2.4 Experiments in thinking

In *On Liberty*, Mill argues that a benefit of political liberty is that it allows "experiments in living" (Mill 1859, Chapter 3). Reason as we might, none of us know which ethical, economic, or political system will turn out to be the best. The long view of history suggests that our most sacred certainties rarely avoid revision or replacement. Free people in a free society have the ability to try out new ways of living. Some new ways of living will prove harmful, others helpful, but we won't know which is which unless we give each other the ability to run the experiments.

Similarly, philosophy encourages experiments in thinking. How we think informs how we act. To stifle thought is to circumscribe all future action to some version of past action. All of philosophy is thought experiment, not in the narrow sense of trolley problems or brains in vats, but in the sense of tinkering with ideas and seeing how one idea hangs together with another idea. In Simon Blackburn's apt description, philosophy is conceptual engi-

neering (Blackburn 2013, 1–2). Engineers rely on experimentation and so do philosophers. Since thought informs action, the freedom to act depends on the freedom to think. To the extent that philosophy teaches people to experiment with thought, it enables citizens in a free society to experiment with action.

2.2.5 The virtue of doubt

Philosophy makes the question "*How do you know?*" familiar and unaggressive. In doing so, it legitimizes and encourages a concern for the epistemic justification of truth claims. A society made up of individuals who see "*How do you know?*" as a valuable question is one guarded (albeit imperfectly) against dogmatism, charlatanism, and the bullshit that so bothered Harry Frankfurt (2005).

Philosophy does not encourage epistemic doubt so that it can revel in unending skepticism. That is a caricature. A culture of philosophy wants people to ask "*How do you know?*" so that we might all come to know better and be more justifiably confident in the knowledge that we have.

2.3 Philosophy's intrinsic value

As indicated above, the instrumental benefits of philosophy for a healthy, free society are myriad. That said, we should not forget that philosophy is an intrinsic good, a thing whose value and activity are identical. In this way it can be like listening to music, playing sports, and building friendship. Doing philosophy for its own sake is, as Simon Blackburn puts it, a "high ground" reason for doing philosophy (Blackburn 2013, 6). Invoking this high ground reason in the context of the Ukraine war may seem callous. Is there not something distasteful in philosophically fiddling while Kharkiv burns?

Yes and no. When Ukraine asks for munitions, it would be absurd to offer metaphysics. And yet there is self-evident value in helping those who are motived to wrestle with issues of truth, beauty, and goodness be able to do so, thereby enabling them to achieve a higher degree of enlightenment, personal betterment, usefulness to others, and general fulfillment.

While teaching in Ukraine, I found the high ground reason for doing philosophy unexpectedly powerful. Most of my lectures and classes were extracurricular. Attendance was voluntary. Students and members of the public came because they enjoyed doing philosophy. I had expected the war to come up in class, or in Q&A sessions at the end of lectures. I had prepared myself to make social, political, and moral connections between Hegel's philosophy of history and Putin's historicism, between Ayer's emotivism and the atrocities at Bucha. In short, I had prepared to defend the instrumental relevance of my work. But the war was never discussed.

There are many reasons that students were disinclined to discuss the fighting, but one was a desire not to allow everything in life, especially intrinsically good things like philosophical reflection, to be colored by the Russian invasion. If even the act of philosophizing is dominated by Russian aggression, then Russia has conquered intellectual as well as physical ground. The students wanted to do philosophy, not talk about why philosophy mattered in the wake of a Russian invasion.

I was a student in a philosophy seminar on the morning of September 11, 2001. My professor did not cancel class. Nor did he twist the day's reading into a timely political critique. He said that philosophy was worth doing in good times and in bad, so we got on with doing philosophy. Students in Ukraine deserve to enjoy philosophy as an end-in-itself no less than students in other parts of the world. To think freely is an act of defiance in the face of illiberal aggression. To participate in seminars in which democracy and liberalism are themselves exposed to rigorous philosophical criticism is to conserve the spirit of democratic liberty for which so many are sacrificing so much.

3. Orysya Bila

My narrative has three parts. In the first, I reflect on the war's onset and its transformative impact on our daily practices, particularly in Ukrainian universities. I consider how these events reshaped my understanding of the relevance of philosophy in times of turbulence, and I caution against a return to a Soviet-style politicization of philosophy in which the academy is naught but the intellectual arm of the state. In the second part, I consider philosophy's value as a distinct form of thinking and as a source of consolation to students in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion. In the third and final part, I reflect on what strikes me as the most important characteristic of philosophy: the creative element of inquiry that allows us to become active agents of change.

3.1 On the use and abuse of philosophy in wartime Ukraine

During the first month of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I experienced two significant events that resonate deeply with the theme of our essay. First, at the Ukrainian Catholic University, where I teach, we had to decide whether to continue our educational programs during a war. The consensus was to maintain the collaborative spirit between faculty and students as a means of mutual support during these challenging and uncertain times. Instead of holding regular classes, we chose to gather online—a necessity, as nearly all of us were taking refuge in bomb shelters. These sessions were designed not just as educational encounters but as opportunities to discuss

themes that bolstered our collective morale, providing a sense of solidarity as the world seemed to crumble around us.

My typical spring semesters involve teaching "Metaphysics and Ontology" to theology students, and the spring of 2022 was no different. However, as I pondered what to share with my students during our online sessions, I was struck by a sudden realization: the topics that once formed the core of my lectures—substance and accidents, universals and particulars, properties and relations, the distinction between mind and body—now seemed trivial and devoid of meaning. In the context of what was happening, the usual discourse felt shallow, almost offensive. The prevailing question that overshadowed our thinking in March 2022 was a profound and yet seemingly unanswerable: "Why? Why has this befallen us?"

In academia, "Why?" typically serves as a cornerstone of philosophical exploration, a question bringing us back to the examination of first principles. Yet, in these circumstances, "Why?" transcended its philosophical roots. It resembled the anguished plea of the Biblical Job, who beseeched God only to be greeted by silence. Confronted with the anxious and exhausted gazes of my students, I experienced a deep sense of helplessness. It was a profound incapacity to grasp or verbally convey the meaning of our shared ordeal.

The second event, unfolding at the same time, involved the release of a statement by rectors of Russian universities. The university rectors publicly declared their support for the Russian President as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine commenced, stating:

> Universities have always been a pillar of the state. Our primary goal is to serve Russia and develop its intellectual potential. Now, more than ever, we need to demonstrate confidence and resilience in the face of economic and informational attacks, effectively rallying around our President, setting an example that strengthens an optimistic spirit and belief in the power of reason among the youth, and instilling hope for the swift arrival of peace. (Agranovych 2022)

Had I not lived through the reality of a totalitarian state in the form of the USSR, this text might have slipped by me unnoticed. Each word resonated with me, bringing back echoes of workers' march slogans, communist party officials' podium speeches, and the familiar voices of my schoolteachers from the 1980s. This rhetoric, all too well-known to myself and my contemporaries, was supposed to have ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was now making an unexpected comeback.

Soviet universities exercised extreme diligence and rigor in admitting students into humanities programs, particularly those focusing on history and philosophy. The KGB meticulously vetted applicants' documents before

they could be formally accepted into these programs. Any association with "unreliable elements" or so-called enemies of the state was strictly prohibited for prospective historians and philosophers. For historians and philosophers, there would be no tolerance for questionable affiliations or tarnished backgrounds.

There was a reason for this meticulous selection process. History and philosophy held a special place in the Soviet academic hierarchy. These disciplines were essential intellectual instruments that maintained the country's adherence to its established ideological path. This prescribed ideological function ensured that history and philosophy could not exist as free disciplines—they were no longer *artes liberales*. The history that was taught was invariably presented as the "correct" version, though it was continually revised in a manner reminiscent of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And the process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right. (Orwell 2000, 73)

The role of philosophy in the Soviet totalitarian reality was distinct and perverse. Philosophy existed primarily as a corpus of texts that legitimized the regime. Interpreters of these texts labored to continually invent new words to redefine the party's course towards a "bright future" in accordance with the latest decision of the latest party congress. Studying the history of Western philosophy through the original texts of, say, Locke or Hume, was possible only with official academic permission, and even then, such texts were only read with eye towards criticizing forms of civilization hostile to the Soviet Union.

Perhaps ironically, a genuine spirit of philosophical inquiry often survived in Soviet camps housing political prisoners. There one could find free thinkers, whose only crime against the regime was Orwellian "thoughtcrime" —the propensity and courage to think differently.

In sum, teaching the finer points of metaphysics and ontology seemed trivial in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but reflecting upon my experience of philosophy as it was practiced in the Soviet Union helped me see the importance of keeping up with my teaching and supporting free thinking, generally. What is more, I came to appreciate philosophy's value as a distinct form thinking and as a distinct form of consolation.

3.2 The consolation of philosophical introspection

Philosophy as a distinct form of thinking is explored by Hannah Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* (1981). Arendt analyzes the nature of thinking, unveiling the complexity of the human mind and its role in shaping human identity and social life. Arendt questions what happens in our consciousness when we think, and how this process affects our understanding of the world and our actions within it. She proceeds from the assumption that thinking is a fundamental human capacity, distinct from knowledge or understanding.

Thinking is born out of paradox. Contradictions and gaps compel our mind to analyze our own experiences and search for patterns and structures. What makes us think, then, is the experience of being at odds with ourselves, or with others, or with the world.

One might have supposed that interest in impractical disciplines like philosophy would wane with the onset of war. And yet, once the initial shock of the full-scale invasion had subsided, there was a surge of interest in philosophy within the universities. Philosophy courses gained in popularity, becoming highly coveted among students from nearly every program. It appeared that the profound disruption of reality caused by the war engendered a widespread desire for deeper understanding. To engage in profound philosophical contemplation, however, philosophers and students alike required time.

In the first weeks of the war, we found ourselves physically incapable of thought, let alone the kind of philosophical thinking described by Arendt. Our entire being was consumed by the instinct to survive the immediate moment. The act of deliberate thinking seemed an extravagance, far too draining of our precious, limited energy. It wasn't until it became clear that the attacks followed a somewhat predictable pattern that they became manageable, and as they became manageable the urge to comprehend our situation internally emerged. Each of us was especially intrigued by the motives behind the Russians' initiation of the war. It felt as though the answer to this question held the key to our entire future.

According to Arendt, thinking is a process of "the soundless dialogue of the I with itself" by which individuals interrogate and contemplate the world around them (Arendt 1981, 74–75). It doesn't necessitate isolation or detachment from others; rather, it involves the capacity to introspectively distance oneself from immediate experiences and needs to engage in reflection.

For students, philosophy courses became a way to meet the need for introspection and self-examination. I remember a time when I led students into Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace* (2002), tackling the profound issue of evil in the world. Given the palpable presence of real evil in our surroundings, I didn't expect them to embrace this text willingly. It was precisely dur-

ing this period that the siege of Azovstal, the battles for Mariupol, and the atrocities in Bucha unfolded in mass killings of Ukrainian civilians, accompanied by abductions, torture, and plundering. Evil enveloped us. Introducing this text was a risk. I wasn't just risking philosophical misunderstanding; I was risking the activation of recent trauma. Our students hailed from all corners of Ukraine, and some were from the very cities where the war's most harrowing events were unfolding.

To my surprise, *Gravity and Grace* resonated more deeply than any other text we explored during that time. Through the text, students began to grapple with the concept of evil in general, and proximate presence of evil in particular. Weil wrote that God cannot be the source of evil; rather, out of love, He withdrew to allow space for the world to exist. The autonomy of the world's existence necessitated a loving God to create a realm where He Himself was absent, but where something distinct from Him could thrive—the world. And because this world diverged radically from the nature of God, it is flawed and susceptible to evil, destruction, and death. Weil's explanation didn't excuse the actions of the Russian aggressor, but somehow it offered a means to reconcile the harsh realities of war with belief in an omnipotent and benevolent God.

As I see it, my students began thinking in Arendt's sense after overcoming the initial shock of the invasion: that is, they were responding to all kinds of contradictions and the experience of being at odds with the world. And this act of reflecting upon the horror of war and attempting to make sense of existence through Weil's texts clearly served as a form of consolation.

3.3 The power of philosophy to craft souls and shape destiny

While philosophy may enable us to grapple with contradictions and simultaneously serve as a form of consolation, I believe philosophy can do more, not least in a time of war. Ultimately, philosophy is a catalyst for creative thinking and profound moral inquiry, and its power lies in its ability to shape how individuals and societies conceptualize and navigate their futures.

Drawing from St. Augustine, Arendt asserts that a fundamental component of thought lies in the faculty of judgment, which allows individuals to differentiate between good and evil, truth and falsehood. Arendt suggests that judgment is more than just a cognitive function or logical deduction. It is a vital component of deep thought closely linked to our capacity to navigate moral dilemmas. It is through judgment that people engage with the world, interpret experiences, and strive to act ethically.

The war in Ukraine has raised many ethical and existential questions. Some of these questions concern the role of history in shaping the identities and narratives of individuals, groups, and nations. Other questions center

on personal and collective responsibility, and the aspirations that we ought to have for the future. In his book *Development and Dystopia*, Ukrainian philosopher Mykhailo Minakov observes that, until recently, Ukraine epitomized a dystopia—a realm where any impulse of development fizzled out before it could instigate irreversible changes. One of the contributing factors to this state of affairs was the longstanding absence of Ukrainian subjectivity as both a nation and a state. While the USSR existed as a multi-ethnic empire, like all empires, it possessed a center and peripheries. It was the center that chiefly shaped the historical and national narratives of the various groups within the Soviet Union.

As I mentioned earlier, historical and philosophical faculties played a significant role within the Soviet Union. They were ideological cornerstones of the Soviet system. What I did not mention is that philosophical faculties were not spread across all universities, but selectively located and prioritized by the central authorities. In fact, in my hometown of Lviv, with a population of roughly one million residents, the philosophical faculty at Lviv National University was only established in 1992—that is, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. And this means that philosophy wasn't simply subject to Soviet ideology and instrumentalization, but it was a privilege accessible only to a select few who would be tasked with shaping the Soviet narrative on behalf of the Kremlin.

Political restrictions on who could study history and philosophy, and how and where they could study it, suggests that Soviet ideologists recognized the power of the humanities to shape individual and social development. According to Mikhail Epstein, when knowledge centers around the essence of humanity, students cannot remain detached. In other words, when studying the humanities, individuals not only uncover objective aspects of the human world, but also cultivate their subjectivity through self-awareness. This means studying the humanities is transformative, and this transformation inevitably entails a moral dimension: i.e., students are forced to think about who they ought to be and what society they ought to live in. In short, when students engage with questions related to humanity, they are not passive observers but active participants in shaping their identity and the future of their communities.[8]

While Soviet ideologists were particularly wary of the creative capacity of the humanities, it is precisely the reflective and creative value of philosophy that resonates most with Ukrainian students today. Philosophical thinking not only creates space for internal freedom but also allows for shaping the future—a future not imposed upon us by others, but one in which we are active agents of change. As Epstein puts it:

[8] See (Epstein and Klyukanov 2012).

> Philosophy as inquiry into first principles and universals does not speculate any more about what was in the beginning, but constructs beginnings and sets up metaphysical parameters for alternative physical and psychical worlds. As the technology of *the first day of creation*, philosophy turns to action. (Epstein and Klyukanov 2012, 270)

One day the war will end. When it does, I hope the younger generation of Ukrainians will recognize themselves as the architects of their own lives and nation. I hope they won't shy away from this philosophical responsibility but embrace it by acting ethically for their own sake and for the sake of future generations.

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