

UNITED WISDOM

Berdyaev: freedom, creativity, and objectification

Traditions and Worldviews

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W-33-N02 · EN

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Epigraph

> *“Freedom is a positive creative power, rather than negative arbitrariness.”*

Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, Chapter VI, the paragraph on freedom’s groundlessness. Our own English translation of the Russian original; a short quotation.

What this article is about

A person can be described through their job, age, habits, and past actions. The description may be accurate and useful, but when does it become a cage? Nikolai Berdyaev connects this problem with objectification: living existence becomes subordinated to what is already known and established about it. His philosophy of freedom suggests seeing a person as a source of a response that cannot be fully derived from a ready-made scheme. Yet freedom in Berdyaev does not mean permission to do anything whatsoever. It is connected with creativity and an action’s inner content. This article examines that knot through examples of work, promises, relationships, and cultural creativity. We will preserve the religious character of Berdyaev’s thought and distinguish his metaphysics from contemporary observations. Our practical question is specific: how can descriptions and rules be used without giving them the right to define a person finally?

I. When a description becomes a sentence

A description helps us orient ourselves as long as it remains open to new testimony. A hypothetical manager knows that an employee missed two deadlines. This is grounds for changing the plan, checking workload, or agreeing on intermediate results. But “he is someone who always lets people down” adds something beyond those episodes. It assigns the future content already known and turns a participant in the conversation into the bearer of a fixed property.

In *I and the World of Objects*, Reflection II, Berdyaev explicitly distinguishes objectification from mere disclosure or embodiment. His concept therefore cannot be reduced to every act of naming an object. For our subject, what matters is the person’s estrangement from living existence when an object-description claims exhaustive authority over them. This is a philosophical question, rather than a term from experimental psychology.

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The possibility of an answer makes the distinction clear. In the first case, the employee is told the facts and asked what happened. Their explanation may be rejected, but it can change the picture. In the second, every explanation confirms the established characterization: objection is called cunning, silence admission, and a promise another deception. The system has closed because nothing can qualify the description, rather than because the description is unfavorable.

This closure can be directed toward oneself too. Someone says “I always abandon what I start,” without distinguishing exhaustion, an unsuitable task, insufficient skill, and a genuinely recurring way of acting. The general phrase saves analytical effort while removing access to these differences. They no longer examine their action; they reproduce a role that seems already to contain the explanation.

The problem cannot be solved by prohibiting negative judgments. Sometimes an action was unacceptable and a promise really was broken. Freedom to answer anew does not cancel the past. It means that the past remains testimony, rather than becoming the person’s entire ontology. An established fact can be named strictly while the question of what the person will now do with it remains open. Responsibility begins in that gap, rather than an escape from responsibility.

II. Freedom that cannot be derived from instructions

Freedom is especially visible where rules do not determine a single substantive answer. A teacher may follow the curriculum while choosing how to explain a difficult idea to a particular class. An author may know the genre and find a form that did not exist before. Someone may fulfill a promise conventionally or propose a more honest option after circumstances change. These cases do not prove metaphysical freedom, but reveal the question it poses.

In Chapter VI of *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, Berdyaev understands freedom as a source of creativity irreducible to the natural order already given. This is his religious and philosophical argument. His language of creative force should not be read as a claim about violating physical laws, adding measurable energy, or a proven brain mechanism. Otherwise a philosophical distinction becomes an unsupported scientific sensation.

The practical question is more modest: what does the subject newly bring to the situation? The novelty need not be great. Sometimes it consists in refusing a familiar humiliating reply. Someone knows the old scenario and can say something different: name a specific disagreement, ask for time, or admit an error without self-destruction. The result may be difficult, but the action is no longer simply a continuation of a habitual role.

This does not mean conditions have no influence on choice. Money, health, available information, and other people’s power define the actual room for action. Talk of freedom

becomes cruel if every restriction is turned into personal weakness. For a choice to have content, we must see which options really are available, at what price, and to whom. The formal assertion “you can always do otherwise” sometimes conceals the absence of an available alternative.

Freedom as a question requires two checks together. Ask what is already given in the situation and cannot be changed by the person. Then ask where their own answer remains possible. Without the first check, the result is moralizing. Without the second, the person disappears into a list of circumstances. Creativity begins with an attempt to find an action that conditions cannot entirely replace with their ready-made explanation, rather than with a denial of conditions.

III. Arbitrariness also speaks the language of freedom

“I am free” is insufficient to make an action free in a substantive sense. A hypothetical person abandons an agreement without warning and explains that they refuse to live by others’ rules. Their refusal may be necessary if the agreement was coerced. But if they promised voluntarily and unexpectedly transferred costs to others, appealing to freedom does not answer the question of responsibility.

Berdyaev distinguishes creative freedom from empty arbitrariness. For our reading, this suggests an important test: does the action have positive content of its own, or exist only as a negation of a demand? Negation is not always bad. Refusing humiliation already has meaning. But habitual demonstrations of noncompliance may gradually make someone dependent on what they resist.

Imagine a hypothetical musician who rejects every editor’s suggestion. He wants to retain independence, but can no longer agree even with a comment about a wrong note. His response is predictable: any outside involvement provokes refusal. From outside, it looks decisive. Within, little choice remains because the opposite side determines behavior. Dependence has changed its sign but has not disappeared.

Positive content can be sought through a simple question: what am I choosing this for? If the answer exists only as “so they see I cannot be controlled,” it is worth examining who still controls the direction of the action. Sometimes the right to refuse must be restored before another answer becomes possible. But the final aim may become one’s own undertaking, rather than an endless demonstration of independence.

Responsibility is not an external leash here. It is part of freedom’s form: someone recognizes that their action enters others’ lives. Communicating a changed decision, naming the limits of possibility, and accepting consequences are also ways to act independently. They do not

destroy authorship of a choice. They help distinguish it from an impulse called freedom simply because the person did not want to examine it at that moment.

IV. Creativity exceeds the release of a new product

Creativity loses meaning if it is measured only by the number of things produced. Someone can publish daily while repeating one form. They can release nothing but change how a task is seen, making later work different. For Berdyaev, creativity concerns the human calling; for this article, the important thing is not to apply his word to every productive activity.

In Chapter X of *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, the artistic act is considered as going beyond simple givenness. This belongs to a broader religious understanding of creativity. We need not declare every successful work a transformation of the world in a literal theological sense. It is enough to notice the difference between manufacture according to a scheme and an answer that changes the relationship to the material itself.

A hypothetical teacher reworks a lesson. She may add fashionable images while keeping the same difficulty: pupils repeat words without understanding. Or she may notice where they lose the connection between two concepts and build a different transition. In the second case, novelty addresses a real problem. It is different from an outward impression of novelty. It should be examined through what it makes possible for another person.

This criterion also protects against romanticizing inspiration. A new action may need reading, skill, another attempt, and attentive examination. Freedom does not make craft unnecessary. If an idea cannot withstand the material, the author needs to learn. Refusal to correct a result under the banner of the creative act's inviolability can turn living initiative into a privilege of avoiding responsibility for its outcome.

At the same time, a result does not exhaust the person. A failed book or project does not prove an absence of personhood. We can evaluate what was done strictly while preserving the possibility of a new action. Creativity connects with responsibility here without complete dependence on success: I answer for the form I created, but need not treat it as the final definition of my value. This difficult balance matters especially where evaluating work easily becomes evaluating someone's right to exist.

V. Why the creator needs the world

A solitary hero who owes nobody anything is a poor figure for discussing Berdyaev's freedom. In Chapter VI of *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, he contrasts closed individualism with the creative person's universal content. Having one's own voice does not require severance from the shared human world. An inner connection matters, and it is not exhausted by an external order or social assignment.

A hypothetical author uses language, editorial work, and the reader's time. Even the most independent work has conditions of emergence and a subsequent life. Acknowledging this does not hand the group the right to write in the author's place. It means seeing that an independent conception exists within real exchange. Someone can defend content while respecting those who help give it form.

If freedom becomes a demand for complete absence of restrictions from the material and other participants, shared work becomes impossible. The editor cannot comment, the performer cannot name a limit, and the reader cannot reject the work. A paradox emerges: the creator defends their own subjecthood while turning everyone else into servicing objects. Such freedom contradicts the condition it claims for itself.

The other side gains no monopoly either. A common interest does not permit demanding that an author change a conviction merely to make sales easier. A particular work can be declined with grounds stated and a decision history preserved. A revision can be proposed without declaring refusal proof of ingratitude. A connection becomes more honest when the difference between required accuracy and disputed taste is not hidden inside the single word "quality."

Practical freedom needs a world that can answer, rather than merely confirm. Contact with another creates resistance; sometimes this reveals a conception's weakness. Resistance should nevertheless be discussed on its substance. Subordination does not become creative by being called collectivity. Independence does not become fruitful because someone refuses to hear any word from another.

VI. Personhood and the convenient role

A role is necessary for action, but smaller than the person. In *Slavery and Freedom*, Chapter I, "The Person", Berdyaev opposes reducing the person to a natural or social part. We use this theme for a bounded question: how can irreplaceable existence be retained alongside functions an organization may legitimately distribute and assess?

At an appointment, someone becomes a patient; at school, a pupil; at work, an employee. These descriptions establish rights, duties, and an order of attention. The error begins when they become exhaustive names. The patient cannot be reduced to an indicator, the pupil to a grade, or the employee to productivity. Accurate measurement of one aspect does not become complete knowledge of who stands before us.

A hypothetical work group has a "reliable person." Urgent tasks are continually passed to him. At first, the role expresses recognition; later, it makes refusal almost impossible: refusing would mean losing a convenient name. Outwardly he is valued highly, but his right to his own workload gradually disappears. An attractive characterization can also objectify when it requires continual conformity to others' expectations.

Leaving the role is not necessarily required. Sometimes its boundaries can be clarified: which tasks enter the agreement, how much time is available, and what needs a separate decision. This is not the philosophical disappearance of dependence. It changes a particular arrangement in which the ability to answer ceases to be a formality. Reliability may include honestly reporting inability to undertake another assignment.

The difference between recognition and privilege must be preserved. People should not demand exemption from all rules because they are more than their role. Equally, an organization should not assert that fulfilling a role exhausts someone's meaning. A rule may be fair and binding in its subject. It becomes excessive when it tries to determine a participant's entire life beyond that subject.

VII. Objectifying oneself

Someone can escape another's label and become dependent on their own image. In the section on slavery to oneself, Berdyaev examines self-enclosure and the temptation of individualism. For a contemporary situation, this poses a question: have I made my protected "I" another immovable object to which every new action must submit?

A hypothetical person decides they are fundamentally calm. They never report irritation, conceal disagreement, and then abruptly break off a relationship. The image initially helped them handle difficulties. Later, it prohibited noticing what did not fit. Protecting identity became more important than recognizing an actual experience and choosing an intelligible response.

Someone else considers themselves free from material motives. Admitting financial need feels like moral decline. They accept unfavorable terms and then become angry with those who took advantage of their consent. Independence will be restored through permission to examine an actual need without automatic condemnation, rather than through another heroic name.

These examples are not diagnoses. They show the structure of a possible error: a description created for orientation acquires the right to prohibit new testimony. Correction begins with concrete language. Instead of "I am not like that," ask what precisely you notice now. Instead of "this is contrary to my nature," ask what consequences this option has and what is actually unacceptable about it.

Continuity of personhood does not require the same reaction to everything. Someone may retain honesty as a value while changing profession, retain care while establishing distance, or retain independence while asking for help. If every change feels like disappearance of the self, freedom has become a duty to reproduce one's portrait. A new answer then requires closer attention to what failed to fit the old story, rather than louder self-assertion.

VIII. Encounter instead of complete knowledge

The other cannot be encountered if space has been left only for confirming our scheme. The academic discussion of Martin Buber in SEP distinguishes I–Thou and I–It relationships. This is different from Berdyaev's objectification. The comparison is limited to a shared question about what is lost when another is represented exclusively as a measurable, usable object.

Objective information itself is no enemy. Helping someone complete a task may require numbers, schedules, and an accurate description. Encounter does not oblige abandoning these. It adds a willingness to discover that behind the information stands a participant who can understand events differently. Their answer need not be final, but without it our knowledge remains knowledge about them, rather than becoming shared understanding.

In a hypothetical conversation, a loved one asks: "Why are you complicating everything again?" The question grammatically permits an answer but already contains a judgment. A different question specifies something concrete: "What is difficult for you about the proposed option?" The answer may reveal a restriction the questioner did not know. The change lies in leaving space for new content, rather than a softer voice.

The right not to enter an encounter also matters. The other person need not immediately disclose experience to prove their subjecthood. They may request a pause or limit the topic. If our philosophy demands complete openness, it risks appropriating the person in the same way it opposes. Respect for an answer includes respect for its limit.

Mutual communication therefore differs from transparency. We do not obtain one another for complete disposal. We create conditions where something important can be communicated, an error qualified, and an agreement changed. This arrangement remains imperfect. Yet it connects knowledge with freedom: facts are taken seriously while their bearer does not disappear into the facts collected about them.

IX. A rule can protect freedom

Criticism of objectification must not become contempt for common rules. Without deadlines, agreements, and procedures, a powerful participant often gains opportunities at a weaker one's expense. A hypothetical group may declare itself creatively free while leaving decisions to its loudest member. An absence of formal restrictions does not yet mean personal freedom for everyone.

Kant's idea of autonomy in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Section II connects freedom with a law rational will regards as its own. Berdyaev understands freedom and its source differently. The comparison matters precisely through that difference: criticism of

external necessity does not require treating every obligation as hostile to personhood. We need to examine what a rule protects and how its authority arises.

A rule may open space for an answer. A scheduled feedback period lets a junior employee raise an objection calmly. Transparent allocation of pay protects them against having to earn the manager’s favor each time. The right to leave a project reduces dependence on another’s arbitrary decision. Here, form creates conditions for practical use of freedom, rather than destroying it.

Elsewhere, a rule conceals power. It changes after the outcome, applies only to some people, or prohibits discussion of its own meaning. The question should then address the particular procedure, rather than declaring all normativity objectification. A broad philosophical critique helps when it distinguishes form’s protective and oppressive functions under specified circumstances.

The working criterion has three questions: is the rule’s subject intelligible, does it treat comparable cases consistently, and is there a way to revise it? These are our contemporary application, rather than a quotation from Berdyaev. They help avoid a romantic extreme in which someone escapes form only to fall under another person’s unrestricted authority, equally confident in their own freedom.

X. Unfinishedness does not remove consequences

A person exceeds their action, but the action remains in the world. Both thoughts are needed to prevent freedom from justifying endless fresh starts. Talk of a creative answer presupposes willingness to see what has happened, who was affected, and what can be repaired. A new form of life must not require others to forget the old one’s cost.

In a hypothetical conflict, someone admits humiliating the other. They may try to explain circumstances, but an explanation does not cancel the report of harm. A new answer begins when the particular act can be named without retreating into “I am bad” as a general image. That image is convenient too: instead of repair, the person merely suffers over themselves. Responsibility returns attention to action and the other.

After admission comes the question of an available change. A public statement may need correction, money may need to be repaid, impossible promises may need to end, or the order of discussion may need revision. An apology can matter but does not automatically replace everything else. Substantive freedom appears in what someone does with their history, rather than a declaration that history no longer defines them.

This movement carries no guarantee of acceptance. The other may decline to restore trust immediately or continue the relationship at all. If a free answer demands obligatory

forgiveness, one person's freedom again makes the other a means. Someone can repair an action while recognizing the independence of whoever decides what the repair means to them. This is the boundary at which creative initiative ceases to be control.

Berdyaev leaves a demanding language of personhood irreducible to a ready-made world of objects. A practical reading need not resolve all his metaphysical questions. It can retain a nearer task: use descriptions, assess consequences, build forms of shared life, and repeatedly examine whether space for a living answer remains within them. Freedom then changes our way of participating in the world rather than leaving it behind.

What this means in practice

Take one self-description often heard in an important situation: "I am unreliable," "I am strong," "I always help," or "I am creative." Do not immediately replace it with a positive one. First record two specific episodes on which it rests. Separately note what actually happened, what you assumed, and what conclusion you drew about yourself. This reveals the distance between testimony and a final name.

Examine what the description prevents you from noticing. The reliable person finds it hard to admit overload; the strong one to ask for support; the independent one to accept a reasonable comment. If such a limit is found, formulate it specifically: "I find it hard to refuse a new assignment because I fear losing recognition." This is a working hypothesis about a particular choice, rather than an explanation of the entire person.

Determine where a new answer is available. It can be small: naming a real deadline, clarifying a duty, asking an open question, or admitting an error without self-humiliation. The test lies in changed action and consequences. You need not prove freedom through a dramatic break or unusual act. A predictable but consciously chosen answer can still be yours.

If a decision affects others, provide a form of responsibility. Communicate a changed agreement, explain a specific limit, and discuss an available replacement. Distinguish a request from a demand: the other need not support the chosen option. Preserving their right to answer is part of examining what you call freedom.

Return to the episode later. What changed: action, availability of choice, distribution of burdens, or only the story about yourself? If external conditions remain unchanged, that too is a significant observation. Some restrictions require resources, help, or a change in relationships' arrangement. A philosophy of freedom must not turn absence of these conditions into an accusation against the person. Its practical usefulness here is noticing a particular place where description ceased to be destiny and became a subject of reflection again.

Key quotation

> *"'Objectification' will not, for me, be identical with disclosure, manifestation, and embodiment either."*

Nikolai Berdyaev, *I and the World of Objects*, Reflection II, §1. Our own English translation of the Russian original; quotation marks normalized typographically. The quotation limits the term: creating a work or accurately describing something does not automatically mean objectification in Berdyaev's sense.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Similarity	Boundary
Berdyaev: personhood ↔ Kant: humanity as an end	People are not exhausted by their usefulness to another.	Berdyaev and Kant differ on freedom's source and the role of law.
Berdyaev: objectification ↔ Buber: I–It	An instrumental relationship can close off encounter.	These terms belong to different systems; Buber is considered through the academic SEP article.
Berdyaev: creativity ↔ his own criticism of individualism	Personal action can connect with the shared world.	Connection does not mean accepting every social demand.
Berdyaev: freedom with content ↔ Kant: autonomy	Freedom is irreducible to an arbitrary impulse.	Kantian self-legislation differs from Berdyaev's religious creativity.
Berdyaev: personhood exceeds function ↔ Solovyov: the other's dignity	A described role does not exhaust human moral significance.	Solovyov's all-unity and Berdyaev's personalist critique do not form one doctrine.

Primary sources and research

1. N. A. Berdyaev. *I and the World of Objects*, Reflection II, §§1–2 — objectification and the existential subject; selected passages of the Russian primary text were read.

2. N. A. Berdyaev. *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, VI — freedom, creativity, arbitrariness, and the person's universal content; selected Russian paragraphs, rather than the entire book.

3. N. A. Berdyaev. *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, X — artistic creativity, the beginning of the chapter in Russian.

4. N. A. Berdyaev. *Slavery and Freedom*, I.1 — personhood and function; selected passages of the Russian original, *О рабстве и свободе человека*.

5. The same work, II.6 — slavery to oneself; selected passages of this section were read.

6. Immanuel Kant. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, II — humanity as an end and autonomy; Thomas Kingsmill Abbott's translation.

7. Martin Buber, SEP — I–Thou/I–It, the relevant section and critical boundaries.

8. V. S. Solovyov. *The Meaning of Love*, Second Article, III — recognition of the other's dignity; a short comparison in the map, based on the Russian text.

Tags

Berdyaev, freedom, creativity, objectification, personhood, subject, existence, personalism, responsibility, arbitrariness, dignity, role, description, identity, independence, relationships, encounter, Buber, Kant, Solovyov, religious philosophy, artistic act, rules, boundaries, obligations, novelty, inner answer

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