Igor M. Diakonoff’s “Kirkenes Ethics”: The Moral Credo of a Great Scholar

Hayim Y. Sheynin
Lafayette Hill, Pa.

During the seven years that I worked at the Institute of Oriental Studies (Leningrad Branch, 1965–1972) I was happy to be associated with an outstanding senior colleague, a wonderful scholar, and an even more wonderful person Igor Mikhailovich Diakonoff, a world famous scholar in many areas of history, philology, and linguistics. In this essay it is not his professional activity that interests me but rather his moral attitude as expressed in his short meditation on ethics.

Diakonoff did not write a scholarly book on ethics but included his thoughts in his memoirs written in Russian and called them “Kirkenes Ethics.” He wrote these reflections in December of 1944 in a style suited for a wide audience. His thoughts on the subject are quite remarkable when read in view of the time and place of their

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1 I express my sincere gratitude to my friends Dr. Stephen A. Karpowitz and Prof. Mark L. Sacharoff for reading the draft of this article and making helpful suggestions.

2 However, in his widely popular and often reprinted book, The Paths of History (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Diakonoff included some discussions of the ethical problems of world history.

3 Igor M. Diakonoff, Kniga vospominaniĭ (Book of Memoirs; St. Petersburg: European House, 1995) 680–86 [Russian]. I thank Evgeniĭ Nikolaevich Kalshikov, director of European House publishers for granting me permission to translate and publish this fragment from the book. First the piece was published as an article in a popular magazine Znanie-sila (Knowledge is a Force) 6 (1989) 82–87. In this first publication Diakonoff cautiously mentions that it was written by a young Soviet officer, his namesake. This disguise, assumed while he lived still under Soviet power, was an act of self-censorship. His son, who was particularly interested in this composition, says that there was no namesake. Apparently, in 1989 Diakonoff revised his draft of 1944 at the request of his friend, French orientalist Jean Bottéro, who was interested in the atheistic approach to ethics. Not long before Diakonoff died, his son, film director Alexei Jankowski, produced a fifty-two-minute documentary in Russian about the life and memories of his father. In this film the major idea of Kirkenes ethics was expressed in the voice of the author.
In this article I translate this short work of moral philosophy prefaced with a brief biographical sketch of Diakonoff and some necessary explanations.

Diakonoff (12 January 1915–2 May 1999) had a long academic career. He started his education in the history department of Leningrad University (where he listened to lectures by Professors Israil’ Grigor’evich Frank-Kamenetzky and Isaak Natanovich Vinnikov) and was soon attracted to Semitic philology, particularly Assyriology, studying under Professor Aleksandr Pavlovich Riftin first in the philological faculty, then in the faculty of oriental studies. At the same time, he studied Hebrew philology, Aramaic, and Arabic languages with Professors Isaak N. Vinnikov and Nikolaĭ Vladimirovich Yushmanov. His formal employment record included the following: research fellow, State Museum Hermitage (1936–1959); docent, lecturer at the department of Semitics at Leningrad University (1940–1941, 1945–1950); research fellow of the Institute for History, Leningrad Branch (1952); research fellow, then leading scholar of the Philological Group at the department of the Ancient Orient (1956–1999); and, finally, head of this department at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R., Leningrad Branch. In 1992 he was inducted into the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. as a full member with the highest title for a scholar in Russia. From 1937 to 2006, the Institute of Oriental Studies published scores of Diakonoff’s research works on the ancient history of Iran and the Caucasus as well as philological and linguistic works on different languages and families of languages. He was especially known in Semitic and Afro-Asiatic linguistics. In addition, he translated from Hebrew, Akkadian, Sumerian, Urartian, Babylonian, and other ancient Oriental languages works about suffering and meditation on life, such as Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Epic of Gilgamesh.

He became an honorary member of the American Oriental Society and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. He held an honorary doctorate from the University of Chicago and was honored by French and Italian Oriental research institutions.⁴

Early in his life, he became interested in Jewish lore. His wife Nina Iakovlevna Diakonova was Jewish, and he was a close friend of her father Iakov M. Magaziner, who was a law professor, expert in the history of law, and a man steeped in the study of Jewish religious literature.⁵ Diakonoff demonstrated his interests in

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⁵ See Aleksandr Kuz'mich Kravtsov, “Towards 115th Birthday of Iakov Mironovich Magaziner,”
Rabbinic literature in conversations with Dr. Klavdiya Borisovna Starkova, another Hebraist in the Institute, and myself. He was interested in those treatises of Talmud and Midrashim that dealt with ethical issues. His friendship with Iakov Mironovich Magaziner was apparent in their collaborative writings about the history of law in the ancient Near East. Diakonoff’s erudition included Hebrew and Aramaic texts of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Mishnah, Talmud, and medieval Hebrew literature. He surprised many of us, including Dr. Starkova, Professor Iosif Moiseevich Tronsky, and a famous historian and expert in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Professor Iosif Davidovich Amusin, with his detailed knowledge of Dead Sea scrolls’ research. The latter was acknowledged when he joined the Institute’s committee to discuss the dissertation of Margarita Mikhailovna Elizarova on the Essenes according to the ancient historians and writings of Dead Sea scrolls.

In the late 1960s, I participated in a committee with Diakonoff and Dr. Anatoliĭ M. Gazov-Ginzberg (another Hebraist) as well as Dr. Rusudan R. Orbeli and Dr. Saurmag Kakabadze (experts on Georgian literature). The committee discussed the Hebrew translation of Vep’khis-tqaosani (The Man in the Panther’s Skin), the twelfth century Georgian epic poem by Shot’a Rust’aveli, translated by Boris Dov Gaponov of Tbilisi. Diakonoff provided detailed references to the Rabbinic literature in the language of the translation and discussed the correctness of some Hebrew passages there. Thanks to our recommendation, this book was legally published outside of Russia.

Sometimes Diakonoff even revealed his familiarity with Yiddish, as did his teachers Frank-Kamenetzky, Vinnikov and Yushmanov. Among his close friends during his university studies were several Yiddish-speaking students. (Grienberg, Konstantin Gorelik, and Zalman Mogilevsky). One of them, Mikhail Grienberg, was learned in Hebrew and traditional Jewish lore, and informed him of Rabbinic exegesis and explained in his Odessa Yiddish dialect why there were six hundred and eleven precepts in the Bible. For close friends, however, Diakonoff’s knowledge of Yiddish was not much of a surprise, especially after learning that he was able to speak even the Gypsy language (Roma, Romani). In his memoirs (especially ch. 7) he speaks fondly about Jewish people in general and about his Jewish friends in particular, as well as about the absurdity of anti-Semitism. There he mentions also his study of Yiddish.

In 1973, the publishing house Belles Lettres (Moscow) published the anthology Poetry and Prose of the Ancient Orient. In any normal country, such a publication

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7 (םואת ורס ENTITY)، ינשא עור יספר (פועחה יכ, פועחה יכ. פועחה יכ). בברבור, פועחה יכ, הראשון ENTITY [Hebrew]. Soon after publication this work was awarded the prize of S. Tchernikhovsky, the highest prize for literary translations in Israel.

8 Igor M. Diakonoff, Poetry and Prose of the Ancient Orient (Moscow: Belles Lettres, 1973)
would not be anything unusual. However, in Communist Russia, where biblical texts had not been published since the revolution of 1917 (with the exception of a very limited edition of the Holy Scriptures published by the Moscow Patriarchy in 1968 and intended only for the needs of the Christian clergy), this was a rare event. For fifty-six years there had been no editions of the entire Bible or a single biblical book. The importance of this publication is difficult to overestimate. It was a great spiritual and cultural event. For the first time, the masses who had been deprived of religion had an opportunity to access parts of Genesis, Jonah, Ruth, Job, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. In an atmosphere of inquisitorial prosecution of all religions, and of Jewish culture in particular, parts of the Bible were published outside of the limited scope of an academic journal.

For many Christians this was their first biblical reading; for the Jews this was a celebration of living Jewish culture. The person who made it possible was none other than Diakonoff, who not only published translations of Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes in this book but added his notes to the excerpt from Genesis and to the books of Jonah, Ruth, and Ecclesiastes. Moreover he wrote a long and informative introductory article about the history of the Hebrews and Hebrew literature from which Russian people could learn—many for the first time—about the existence of significant ancient Jewish literature. Given the conditions of Russia in 1973 this act by Diakonoff was, indeed, a daring exploit. Diakonoff’s introductory article might practically serve also as a brief introduction to Hebrew Bible. It is worth noting that several years before this event the ready type setting of Diakonoff’s translation of Song of Songs was destroyed by the KGB (which was responsible for state censorship).

In 1938 Diakonoff’s father became a victim of Stalinist terror, a fate that also befell some classmates of his. Afterwards, his father-in-law Professor I. M. Magaziner was dismissed from the university. From 1942 to 1946 Diakonoff’s academic career was interrupted when he served as a commissioned officer in the Soviet Army. In this capacity he served for three years on the Karelian front, ending the war in Norway, a country with which he was very familiar, since he spent his childhood (1922–1929, with two years interruption) in Christiania (later Oslo), where his father was a financial officer in the Soviet embassy. Igor even studied in the school, where some time before him the future king of Norway, Olaf V, studied. In October 1944, there in the little town Kirkenes, which was liberated by the Soviet army, Diakonoff was appointed the deputy commandant.

It was in Kirkenes, Finnmark County, in the extreme Northeastern part of Norway, captured by the U.S.S.R. from Germany in October 1944, that Diakonoff, a twenty-nine year old junior officer of the Red Army, wrote his notes on the sheets of Soviet flyers that were intended to be used to address the local population. Much

[Russian]. Later the Song of Songs in Diakonoff’s translation was reprinted in Lyric Poetry of the Ancient East (Moscow, 1984) 81–117; commentaries, 181–215. His translations of other biblical books were published until 2000.
later, in the nineties, while writing his memoirs, Diakonoff included them in the chapter chronologically corresponding to the years of the Second World War.

The biographical facts of Diakonoff’s personal experience—the loss of his father and younger brother, his life under the Soviets, the constant threat of having to share the fate of most his classmates and teachers, the necessity of compromises with evil, and above all the terrors of war—undoubtedly influenced a number of points in his “Kirkenes Ethics.”

It is not my intention to offer an analysis of Diakonoff’s moral philosophy but rather to make his thoughts known outside of Russia. However, several characteristics are obvious. Elements of humanist and Protestant doctrines are mixed with Darwinist evolutionary theory. Although God is nowhere involved in his ethical principles, Diakonoff cites some religious literary works and demonstrates his knowledge of Christian and Jewish texts. However, it is worth mentioning that one of Diakonoff’s driving ideas was that there is no need of religion or a deity to arrive at ethical principles.

Perhaps the category of “conscience,” declared as the driving force of good deeds, is the most important element of his moral philosophy. Although Diakonoff’s moral views combine the influences of Christian and Jewish ethics, not unlike those of Friedrich Nietzsche, he mentions that he does not need concepts of paradise and hell (i.e., reward and punishment) for his understanding of good and evil actions. Also, it is easy to see that Diakonoff is very close to such thinkers as William David Ross (1877–1971), especially with regard to understanding the right and the good. There is no evidence, however, that Diakonoff was familiar with Ross’s works, even though they were available in Russian academic libraries.

The main contents of the “Kirkenes Ethics” can be summarized as follows:

1. One does not need a deity (godhead) as the driving force for imposing moral principles onto human society, since the sole authority of ethics is the human conscience that is innate to each individual.
2. The entire scope of the ethics, valid for any society, can be expressed as two general principles:
   a. The good of my neighbor is more important than my own good;
   b. As far as possible an individual should not increase world suffering.
3. War is inimical to a universal understanding of the concept of “my neighbor” and is itself the greatest of crimes.
4. “My neighbor” here is understood not as an individual, but as a species. So observation of the ethical rules is necessary for the preservation of the human species.
5. Violations of principles a and b under point 2 happen because humans are imperfect.

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6. It is the human conscience that drives us to observe the two main principles under point 2 and that dictates a practical rule: We have to do our duty to the extent of our understanding, without worry of whether or not we are going to be forgiven in the end.

What follows is Diakonoff’s essay in my translation. The reader should excuse the style and the brevity of the statements, since they were written without access to books or without proper editing in the middle of the war. When necessary I insert my own explanations in square brackets. All notes to the text are mine, with the exclusion of those which are marked with Diakonoff’s name.

“Kirkenes Ethics”

In December 1944 it happened that I had some free time. I observed the ruins of the houses destroyed by our bombers and burned by retreating Germans; and these led me to meditate about good and evil. I took red sheets that were going to be used to print flyers (propaganda flyers of the Red Army addressed to German soldiers and the local Norwegian population) and wrote a piece that afterwards I called “Kirkenes ethics.”

The opinion that there exist many various ethics that change according to a given society and its means of production, its place in time, or race, nationality, religion, or class is wrong. There exist only two single main ethical principles for all the systems of society and its productivity, periods, races, nationalities, religions, and classes; the difference is only in the quantitative interpretation of the ethical concepts.

The first ethical principle or maxim is that the good of my neighbor\textsuperscript{10} is more important than my own good.

This is true pragmatically, because in our life we are used to identifying a good man as altruistic and a bad man as egoistic.

This is correct biologically, because “I” [ego] means a person [individual], while “my neighbor” is not a constant defined individual; therefore he represents a species.

From the biological aspect, the essence of life consists in the preservation of the species rather than of the individual.

It is also true from a socio-economical aspect, because an individual cannot exist while not being a part of the collective, but the collective can exist without an individual. If the individual appropriates the first place for himself, he, in the final account, destroys the society and thus negates premises of human existence.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} In the New Testament the term “my neighbor” or “my brother” sometimes is used in the sense “other than myself.” See e.g., Matt 5:22, 43; Mark 12:28. This seems to be a parallel to biblical Hebrew use of the terms פָּרָן, פַּרְעֹל, עַמּ (brother, friend, associate).

\textsuperscript{11} See similar ideas in works of ancient Jewish ethics: e.g., Isa 61:1; Prov 29:23; m. Avot I:13; IV:4; VI:5; b. Shabb 30b; b. Sanh. 88b, etc.
This is correct from a religious perspective, because in any religion God and divine powers have priority over any individual; “I” [ego] might be conceived as a composite of divinity but only for the reason that “I” [ego] is a part of mankind and therefore not as something more important than “my neighbor,” etc.

Therefore the principle of priority of the good of my neighbor over my good—the first principle of ethics—without fail should be common for any viable ethical system.

By the way, this principle provides the answer to the question that reached us from distant antiquity, that was asked even by the authors of “Innocent sufferer,” Ecclesiastes, and Job: why are the righteous unhappy and those who are evil happy? The answer is: because the happiness of an individual is not very important; what is really important is the good of this association of people which we conventionally call “my neighbor”; and also because this association of people would be destroyed without the righteousness of the righteous.

People frequently ask: Is it really unjust, that the righteous not be rewarded and the evil go unpunished? The answer is contained in the following parable. “A father had two sons; one was obedient and kind, hard-working and compassionate; another one said: “Father, I will be obedient, if you give me sweet wine; kind if you give me honey-cake; hard-working if you give me money; and compassionate if you praise me.” Should the father reward his second son? No, because the reward will not make him more righteous, but it will spoil him and will lead him to the greater evil. Should the father reward his first son? Also no, because cheap is the good deed, which anticipates reward, and if the first son is rewarded, he will not be better than second one. The reward is a gift, a mercy, but it does not follow logically from righteousness.

(This is why the author of the “Kirkenes ethics” believes neither in paradise, nor in the hell, but “Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day”). Nevertheless, as we will see further, even in the ethical system based on paradise and hell, the first principle of ethics is preserved [i.e., valid], although it is twisted by futile promises of reward. Man is righteous not because he anticipates reward. He is righteous because he is righteous. It is laid out in the nature of man that some individuals have to be righteous. Otherwise mankind would destroy itself. An innate force that

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13 See Matt 21:28–31; also m. Avot 1.3. The Jewish attitude toward this problem is exposed in George Foot Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era (3 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:90.

14 Matt 6:34. Diakonoff cites the passage from the Sermon on the Mount, first in Church Slavonic “но дозвлеет дневи злоба его,” then in Russian translation.
makes an individual righteous may be called conscience. It is possible also to say that “God’s kingdom is within us,” but this is another way to express the same idea.

For the survival of mankind, it is unnecessary that all be righteous; it suffices if only some people are. But a portion of conscience is hidden in each person, good and evil, with the exception of a few monarchs and great leaders.

It might be possible, even probable, to explain the existence of conscience biologically, as a certain mental construction necessary for the species’ survival; such a mental disposition is not understood as yet on a biological level but might be explained in the future, the same way as biologists have already discovered some mechanisms of fear, anger, and joy. On the contrary, conscience can likely be explained as a certain purely spiritual (religious) phenomenon, although for this treatise it does not matter.

Now we come to the historical differences between the ethical systems of various societies. The differences may be regarded as quantitative and connected to the concept “one’s neighbor.” Even the most primitive savage who lives with the rule “if I eat my enemy, that is very good; if my enemy eats me, that is very bad” undoubtedly follows the same first principle of ethics. The point is that the enemy is not “his neighbor.” The weak point of the majority of ethical systems is that they openly or tacitly exclude sometimes a lesser and sometimes a greater part of mankind from the number of “neighbors.” Sometimes they reach the point that they consider a “non-neighbor” and “no man,” just as freedom-loving Greeks considered slaves and barbarians “no men.” During more modern times all members


16 Diakonoff might have had in mind a popular Jewish notion about Lamed-Waw Tsadikim (thirty-six righteous people). The Jews maintain that there are always among them 36 righteous people, God, even when He is furious over the Children of Israel’s sins, would not destroy the entire nation (b. Sanh 97b; b. Sukkah 45b).

17 Diakonoff includes the following note at this point: “It seems as if it is backed by some recent biological studies.” At the present time, the literature on biological and psychological mechanisms of emotions is vast. It is very difficult to determine which original research Diakonoff had in mind. Apparently, he was familiar with the development of psychoneurology and biopsychology since the 1940s in Russia and possibly in Western Europe. He might have seen this literature at the exhibits in the Library of the Academy of Sciences (BAH), where I met him frequently. The exhibits included the new acquisitions received by the library on a weekly basis. Another possibility is that he had friends who worked in this field of research. From the older works see Philip Bard and Vernon B. Mountcastle, “Some Forebrain Mechanisms Involved in Expression of Rage with Special Reference to Suppression of Angry Behavior,” Research publications – Association for Research in Nervous and Mental Disease 27 (1948) 362–404; James Olds, Pleasure Centers in the Brain (San Francisco, Calif.: W. H. Freeman, 1956). From the more recent works see Jaak Panksepp, Affective Neuroscience: the Founding of Human and Animal Emotions (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Margaret M. Bradford and Bruce N. Cutbert, “Emotions, Motivation, and Anxiety: Brain Mechanisms and Psychophysiology,” Biological Psychiatry 44 (1998) 1248–63; Richard J. Davidson, “Emotion and Affective Style: Hemispheric Substrates,” Psychological Science 3 (2006) 39–43.

18 It is almost certain that Diakonoff referred to the Bolshevik leaders and Hitler as people without conscience. It is more difficult, however, to establish a list of “a few monarchs” with the same deficiency.
of an antagonist race, ethnicity or social class were considered as “no men.” Even if we declare together with Schiller, “Millions, embrace one another, flow together in a single joy,” in fact, no one may identify “my neighbor” with all “mankind.” Saint Francis (if I am not mistaken) and Siddharta Gautama Buddha included all living beings in the circle of their “neighbors,” and the wonderful book “Dersu Uzala” by Arseniev teaches us that a Siberian native, the title character, behaved the same way. I bow down before these three men, but I know that even Gautama, who is very high in my esteem, and the Apostle Paul who is not as high a person in my opinion—although I acknowledge his leading role in turning Christianity into a great religion—did not completely include women into the number of “neighbors.” Even the most complete formula in the “Epistle to Colossians” does not include women.

Concerning this point, even Jesus of Nazareth was not always logical. His category “I” is indivisible, while the category “my neighbors” reveals a dichotomy

19 “An die Freude” (Ode to Joy, 1785) is one of Friedrich Schiller’s best known poems, especially popular after Ludwig van Beethoven included it in his musical setting at the end of his 9th symphony (1824). Diakonoff quotes lines 9–10 in Russian translation.
Seid umschlungen, Millionen!
Diesen Kuß der ganzen Welt!
(From embraced, you millions!
This kiss for the entire world!)
Diakonoff doesn’t mention, however, that the poem is a deeply pious work. At the end of the same stanza God appears as the loving father and in the final stanza as the final judge. Divinity permeates the entire poem.


22 Vladimir Klavdievich Arseniev, Dersu the Trapper (trans. Malcolm Burr; New York: Dutton, 1941; repr. Kingston, N.Y.: McPherson & Company, 1996); Through Ussurian Region (Dersu Uzala); A Voyage to the Mountainous Area Sikhote-Alin’ (Vladivostock: Tip. “Ekho” 1921) [Russian]. Diakonoff was fascinated with the character of Dersu Uzala, the hero of the book of the famous Russian traveler V. K. Arseniev who described his travels (1906–1907) with the native [Nanay-gold] guide Dersu Uzala (real name, Derchu Ochala) through the Ussurian region, in the far East of Russia between the Usuri and Amur rivers up to the Sikhote Alin’ Range, north of China. He uses this book as an example, because it became extraordinarily popular among young people in Russia from the 1920s to the present time. The book was so popular that it was published in over two dozen editions and translated into many languages. The book was used as the basis for a movie on two occasions, the first a 1961 Soviet film by Agasi Babayan and the second one a 1975 Soviet-Japanese film by Akira Kurosawa.

23 “Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man” (RSV)

24 If the author had in mind Jesus’ relation to women in general, he might be right, because both in Judaism and in Christianity the role of woman was submissive first to the patriarch of the family, then to the husband. Women were excluded from church leadership, especially from
into two concentric circles. In the inner circles are placed those who are “more close neighbors”; in the external ones are placed those who are “less close neighbors.”

This involuntary breach of the Golden Rule is not a caprice but a consequence of the immanent imperfection of the same ethical principle: it is absolutely true when applied only to two people but invalid when it is applied to relations with the third one. Like the problem of three bodies in celestial mechanics, this problem doesn’t have an obvious solution, in any case without use of a refined mathematical apparatus, with which “I” cannot operate in its relations with people. The good of my neighbor has an advantage over my good. In cases where I simultaneously have relations with two people, it is obvious that the good of both the first one and the second one has an advantage over my good. And what would happen, if the good of one is not the good of another? Or, if I have to concede my good to my neighbors, how should I choose between them, while the good, as it most frequently happens, is indivisible?

Parable: Two children of the same gender and age are drowning in a canal. I, a woman, may save only one child. Whom shall I choose? (The so-called problem of Buridan’s ass). Let us suppose, one of the children is mine. Would I be blamed, if I, the mother, will save my child?

Of course if we have in mind some lives of saints, let us say, the Life of Alexis, positions requiring any form of ordination. Male leadership has been assumed in the church and within marriage, society, and government. See Evelyn and Frank Stagg, Woman in the World of Jesus (Westminster: John Knox, 1978). See there all the references to Jesus’ opinions. However, Jesus protected women by stressing the ties of marriage and denying the validity of divorce.


26 “Buridan’s ass” refers to a medieval paradox concerning the logic of rationality and freewill. When the ass is placed midway between two identical piles of hay, he starves to death, since there is no reason for moving one way rather than the other. The ass is not referred to in the Sophismata of Buridan but was probably an example used to refute Buridan’s opinion, since he held that choice is always delayed until reason has decided in favor of one course of action against another. A similar example concerning a dog is found in Aristotle, Cael. 295b.32.

27 The Life of Alexius, Man of God (Житье Алексея человека божия) is a hagiographic work translated into Slavonic from Greek and known to Russians at least from the eleventh or twelfth century. This story tells about events which happened during the reign of the Roman emperors, brothers, and co-rulers Arcadius (377–408 C.E.) and Honorius (395–423 C.E.) at the time of pope Innocentius I (pope 401–417 C.E.). Alexius was the only son of rich and pious patricians Euphemian and Aglaïde, who obtained him by prayer. The parents prepared their well-raised and educated son for a brilliant future. Alexius married a virgin of the “royal house,” but the young man, striving for a Christian feat of asceticism and devotion, when he was left alone with his newlywed wife, gives her back his wedding ring with the following words: “Take it and keep it, and let God be between us for as long as He pleases.” Leaving Rome in secret, Alexius departed to Edessa of Mesopotamia to worship the image of Jesus Christ unmade by human hands and began his longtime exploit of voluntary poverty: after he gave away all that he could, wearing rags, residing together with beggars he lived by alms and prayed at the doors of the church of the Holy Virgin. His holiness was uncovered by the sexton seventeen years into his feat, revered by the locals, Alexius tried to escape from being worshiped by the masses but as the fates decreed again found himself in Rome,
God’s Man, or take another saint (of different kind, whose name I forgot), who left his fifteen-year-old sister vulnerable to the violence of men in a city and departed to a monastery to save his own soul; or if we remember other similarly unsympathetic stories, it might seem a good deed to doom to suffering one’s closest loved ones; indeed [by this standard] it would be the pinnacle of sanctity.

However, any normal and decent person would say, being neither saint nor Buddha, that there is no moral blemish on a mother who saves her own child and not the other one. The reason is similar to the first ethical principle innate to a man, that is Kant’s "categorical imperative"—exactly so is the dividing of “my neighbors” into concentric circles is also an innate feeling.

Second parable: a man loves one woman but is betrothed with another (or already married or is bound by moral obligations). It is clear that these women have an advantage over the man. The circumstance, that he loves, is not important in this case. But is it clear that the man must prefer the one with whom he betrothed and not the second one, whom he loves? And what if she also loves him, while the future bride does not? Or if the man rejects his beloved woman and causes terrible

in the house of his parents. Unrecognized, he spent the last seventeen years of life living with other beggars from the charity of his parents. With Christian meekness he bore the mockery and insults of his own servants. Only after Alexius died was it revealed that the vanished and mourned-over son and husband had lived in the house unrecognized for seventeen years. Then he was honored and declared a saint. For thirty-four years the parents and faithful wife mourned him and considered him dead. See Monuments of the Literature of Lives of Saints (3 vols.; S.l.: s.n., 1838–1914) 2 [Russian]; Varvara P. Adrianova-Peretts, Life of Alexis Man of God in Old Russian Literature and Folklore (Petrograd: I. A. Bashmakov, 1917; repr., The Hague: Mouton, 1969 [Russian]); Vasilii I. Uspensky and Nikolaǐ Vorob’ev, eds., Illuminated Life of Alexis Man of God (St. Petersburg: s.n., 1906 [Russian]); new edition in the Library of Literature of Ancient Russia (ed. Dmitrii S. Likhachev et al.; 15 vols.; St. Peterburg: Nauka, 1997–2006) 2 (2004 [Russian]).

28 Diakonoff includes the following note at this point: “Didn’t St. Alexis disobey the commandment ‘Honor your father and your mother...?’” He refers here to Exod 20:12 and Deut 5:16.

29 The author possibly refers to the Life of Antonius the Great (Житие преподобного отца нашего Антония Великого). See St. Dimitrii, Metropolitan of Rostov, Lives of Saints (12 vols.; Moscow: Izd. Sinodal’noi tip., 1902–1911; repr., Moscow: Izd. Sinodal’noi tip., 1968–1969) However there is no mention there that the sister was fifteen year old and that he left her without protectors; on the contrary, he handed her to relatives. Considering references of Diakonoff to the lives of St. Alexis and St. Antonius the Great, we should mention that abandoning children is contrary to Christian doctrine. In addition, joining the monastery is always connected with renouncing a former sinful life and rejecting one’s family. Worldly ethics is not applicable to such deeds. (Here I would like to thank Father Mark of Philadelphia for the elucidation of some problems of Christian ethics.) Incidentally the English translation of the life of St. Antony is included in A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1892) 4:188–221.

30 The Christian church considers as saints persons who die for the sake of their religion (martyrs), who perform miracles either during their life time, or whose relics, tombs, and icons generate miracles after their death. Some theologians say saints are also those persons who emulate the way of the life of Jesus Christ.

31 The notion of the categorical imperative is one of the distinctive concepts of Kantian ethics. See Immanuel Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (ed. Mary Gregor; Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
consequences, while the second one is relatively indifferent to the possible course of events? The number of various possible conditions is infinite, and almost never is there a definite solution.\textsuperscript{32}

Third parable. This is the one that really caused the writing of this “Kirkenes ethics.” This is when the principles of ethics are applied to a case of war. Naturally, war stands in the way of a universal understanding of the concept of “my neighbor” and in any case is the greatest of crimes. But for now let us leave it aside and avoid asking who is guilty of this war. Let us treat those ethical problems that affect simple people, like “we” and “you” during war. War immediately divides all the people by a definite frontline. No ethical advantages belong to the enemy. To kill the enemy does not mean to commit homicide. In theory it relates only to an armed enemy wearing a military uniform, who is not a prisoner of war. In reality none of this is true. A pilot of a bomber, when he drops his death-dealing bombs, certainly knows that he will or may tear to pieces along with an armed enemy also civilians and children. An artillery-gunner possesses the same knowledge as an infantry man (more frequently than usually assumed).\textsuperscript{33} Robbery, theft, and rape accompany every war. The author of the “Kirkenes ethics” started his military service with the theft of hay from a peasant: his people were accommodated in a shack with no heating. This was in October, and the place was not far from the Arctic Circle.

Now let us suppose that in these conditions there is a large enough strip of frontline fortified by the enemy and surrounded by dense forest and the commander of the army (or a division) does not have information about what is going on behind hostile fortifications. One reconnaissance party after another perishes, the commander already has lost four or five hundred men, and finally a reconnaissance group brings a prisoner, an enemy officer. This officer, however, is silent and, thus, is faithful to his duty because the lives of thousands of his comrades depend on his silence. What is our commander supposed to do? Does the fact that the enemy officer is delivered to our side of the front and disarmed automatically transfer him from the circle of “not neighbors” to the circle of “my neighbors?” And even if this is true, should not the duty of the commander to his troops prevail over his duty as a prisoner?\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} The second parable most probably was inspired by a personal experience of the author and therefore is not a part of the original work. It was added by the author when he was editing the manuscript for publication.

\textsuperscript{33} Diakonoff includes the following note at this point: “All of this has been written before Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki.” He has in mind the ferocious bombardment of the German city of Dresden which was devastated on 13–14 February 1945 by phosphorus and high-explosive bombs dropped by the British and American air forces. On 6 August 1945 the Japanese seaport Hiroshima was the first city to be struck by an atomic bomb, the second city in Japan was Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. Both cities were bombed by the United States Air Force. The casualties of the civilian population in all these cities greatly outnumbered military casualties. It is worth noticing that Diakonoff was an eyewitness to numerous violations of ethics during his military service, especially when he served as Soviet military link officer to Norwegian civilians, since he dealt with their complaints.

\textsuperscript{34} The present topic arises frequently and is officially reviewed in every war. Most recently this
I believe that similar problems may have a reasonable solution. Principally, they should be solved by intuition. By saying this we, as it seems, destroy all the complex construction of universal ethics, most importantly, the first ethical principle—the issue of conscience which we have suggested is innate. Do not ninety percent of the ethical problems we face, require more complicated solutions? There is no simple solution to any ethical problem in particular, but there is a general rule of ethical behavior.

Now we turn to the second maxim of ethical principles which also has a universal character: as far as possible not to increase world suffering. This rule is more difficult to explain.

We still have not defined “good” and “evil.” In the biological aspect, “good,” as it seems, is just the survival of species. However, this cannot be the immediate goal of the action that is motivated by our conscience because such actions are irrational, automatic, and emotional. In addition, when an individual acts in accord with his conscience and his intuition he may not know what is important for the survival of the species in this particular case. The decision, which is determined spontaneously on account of a situation and is not predetermined, may not be dictated by the highest considerations; indeed it occurs irrationally, automatically, and emotionally. If an individual just tries not to increase any suffering in the world, he indirectly acts in the interest of the survival of a species and in this sense does a good deed.\textsuperscript{35}

As to “evil,” the only possible undisputed definition of this concept is the identification of “evil” with suffering. Suffering may be immediately emotionally perceived by our senses; moreover a man is capable of sympathy with the sufferings of others. Therefore, the rule “do not cause suffering to others”\textsuperscript{36} does not exceed human capacities, even in cases where the action is automatic and emotional.

occupied both the public opinion and the legal minds in the United States concerning the practice of using torture by American authorities to extract information from the individuals captured in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2002. Apparently D\textsuperscript{iakonoff}'s meditations on the topic written in 1944 are still relevant.

\textsuperscript{35} Diakonoff includes the following note at this point: “It is possible to argue that the suffering of individuals may be biologically necessary for the species. This is true. However, in the relation between A (“me”) and B (“my neighbor”) individuality is represented only by A, while B represents an entire species. “My neighbor” as a neighbor is not an individual but a representative of a species. The sufferings of an individual may be for the benefit of a species; the suffering of the species though amounts to unconditional evil. Therefore the suffering is part of A, not B.” This opinion is based on the notion of preservation of the species in the Darwinist theories. The present translator does not accept this principle as the right one, because with this it would be possible to justify evil done to an individual “for the sake of a species.” The opposite attitude is presented in Jewish sources, where much more sympathy is expressed for the suffering of individuals; see the views of two orthodox rabbis, where also old Rabbinic sources are discussed. See Rabbi Dr. George N. Schlesinger’s talk given to the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists in 1963. A summary of this talk appears in INTERCOM 6 (1963); see also Aryeh L. Carmell, “The Problem of Evil: the Jewish Synthesis: Some New Insights from a Kabbalistic Source,” \textit{Proceedings of the Associations of Orthodox Jewish Scientists} 1 (1966) 92–100.

\textsuperscript{36} It seems to be a generalized formulation of the words by the Jewish sage Hillel the Elder (ca. 110 B.C.E.–ca. 10. C.E.) who said: ד"עלאל תיינא עלא תיינא לא עלא תיינא (“Do not do to your fellow
It is true, if it is relatively easy to determine who your neighbor is—at least in the limits of the inherited norms of our circle, our society, our ideological milieu—and if it is relatively easy even to figure out which of my actions would more likely increase “evil” in the world, sufferings in the world, it is much more difficult to select from my actions those which are more likely to increase evil in the world. What we have to keep in mind are the consequences of our actions (e.g., see the story “Forged Coupon” by Leo Tolstoy\(^\text{37}\)). It is an undoubted fact, for example, that violence, which, in the moment it was committed, seemed necessary and the least evil action—let us say in the time of this war or during the civil war\(^\text{38}\)—has a tendency to change completely the conscience of the persons who committed it and to generate a chain reaction of violent actions that can continue without end for decades. This is easy to prove by the known facts of the history of the twentieth century. So it is true that the rule “do not cause sufferings in the world” is also correct in its sociological aspect. As to a religion, in any case, if one looks at contemporaneous religions, this rule, evidently, is true.

Going back to the difficulties of selecting from those actions that increase suffering (how is one to choose the act that increases sufferings the least?), we return to the issue of intuition, that is, in the final analysis, to conscience. We have already mentioned that almost no one is devoid of conscience completely. However, having said this, we should keep in mind the difference between two types of individuals: on the one hand, fanatics who are ideally capable of action but see only one immediate consequence of it and, on the other hand, members of the intelligentsia, capable of seeing various ethical sides of an object and, by this very capacity, more limited in their ability to act. This limitation is only imaginary, because, in essence, it means a restriction of the capacity to increase suffering in the world. Decisions about my actions depend entirely on my intuition, my conscience, and certainly on my freedom of will from which fact follows the functional role of conscience. To this extent, ”God’s kingdom is within us.” Only we ourselves may show mercy and make sacrifices for others.

\(^37\) Leo Tolstoy’s story “Forged Coupon” (1904) traces the cancerous growth of evil and demonstrates with dramatic force the cumulative misery resulting from one apparently trivial act of wrongdoing. See Leo Tolstoy, The Forged Coupon: And Other Stories and Dramas (ed. Charles T. Hagberg Wright; London: Nelson and Sons, 1911).

\(^38\) Diakonoff has in mind the Second World War against the aggression of Nazi Germany (1941–1945) and the Russian Civil War—the war of “reds” and “whites” that followed the Russian Revolution (1917–1921).
As we have tried to explain above, whatever the rules of our life are—biologic evolution, the second law of thermodynamics, or God—this force has nothing to do with an individual but at best applies only to the species. This force is not all good, nor all merciful. In the human sense, it may not be good at all (for an individual). And, apparently, it cannot be omniscient, except regarding most general laws of the development of the universe.\(^{39}\)

Moreover, we may maintain that omniscience is physically and philosophically impossible: it infringes upon the principle of uncertainty. When we know the place of a particle in space we may not know its direction and velocity; when we know the velocity, we may not know its place in space.\(^{40}\) We note that the question is not

\(^{39}\) Diakonoff includes the following note at this point: “Original sin, as depicted in the Christian tradition, is something very trivial. It is difficult to understand what evil (in the sense of the definition given above) was committed by Adam and Eve. Perhaps we might consider this story a parable about the future and remote consequences of our deeds. But this story contradicts the conception of omniscient deity. It might foresee the commission of original sin because a decision of human free will would be known to a deity before the sin was committed. So why the punishment in this case? And is it not too cruel a punishment by the father of his children (it lasts for thousands of years)?? Also, the sacrifice of Jesus by the Father deity creates a strange impression: it turns out that Jesus knew that his sufferings would last only six hours—i.e., less than the death-agony of the majority of the people who die from natural causes after which he knew exactly that he would wake up in paradise, while the average dying person cannot be sure of that and suffers more from this ignorance! Eternal punishment is unjust and immoral. Generally speaking, why is so much pain necessary for securing eternal bliss for the chosen ones, if their fate is already predetermined by an omniscient deity, who might make their dying brief? Original sin may be explained only as an innate imperfection of the human conscience and, therefore, of human actions. The sacrifice of a deity may mean a voluntary participation in this imperfection and promised reward—that is, an unmerited gift, grace. It would have better meaning, if it were to tear mankind away from its too narrow circle of “neighbors” and demonstrate that the rule should be used universally. I do not believe that after this discussion it is possible to construct an omniscient deity. In general, the sacrifice of Jesus for all mankind seems to me much more convincing if one believes that he was a man.”

Many ideas expressed in this note are contrary to Christian beliefs and sometimes offensive to them. Either they testify to Diakonoff’s theological naïvité or to the influence of atheistic doctrines current in official Soviet ideology. The notion of original sin preceded the development of Christian tradition, since it already appears in the story of Adam and Eve’s fall in Genesis 2:15-3:24. Following Diakonoff’s ideas, the best understanding of this passage would be that the ancient authors meant, on a mythic level, to explain the mortality of humans as a result of God’s punishment for Adam and Eve’s fall. However, in the period of so-called formative Judaism, the rabbis stressed the idea that the punishment was imposed for disobeying the commandment of God. See George Foot Moore, Judaism In the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tannaim, (3 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997) 1:474–76. The rabbinic sources are quoted there. Moore answers the issue raised in the first part of Diakonoff’s question: “Death is thus the damage that all men suffer from Adam’s sin. To ancient conceptions of the solidarity of the family, clan, nation, race, and the liability of all for one, death raised no question of divine injustice; that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children was the doctrine of experience as well as of Scripture,” (475–76). As to the second paragraph in this note, it should be said that some early Eastern Churches (fifth to seventh cent.) taught that either Jesus had a double nature (God and man) or he was “a perfect man who did not sin.” See James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, Trajectories through Early Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). Later such doctrines were declared heretical.

\(^{40}\) According to quantum mechanics, the more precisely the position (momentum) of a particle
the perfection of human cognition, for in nature even an omniscient being might not have knowledge of that which does not exist.

In general, the supreme force is highly indifferent to our personal sufferings, as demonstrated in the book of Job. Nevertheless, exactly this force put into us the ability to have a conscience—one that can be destructive in an individual, but necessary for the survival of mankind.

And only in this form of “God’s kingdom”—which is within us—may we search for goodness, mercy, and love. However, even here I do not find a place for faith or hope. Hope may sooth us, but it is unnecessary for good deeds. Moreover, regarding paradise and hell, I believe that holy martyrs were righteous not because they hoped to get a reward but despite the fact that they hoped for it.

So then let us hope that our conscience will not very often mislead us and that what lives in us, as a good father, may forgive us those injuries which we, from time to time voluntarily or involuntarily, leave on the ribs of our neighbors. But certainly this hope as any other one is futile and we have to do our duty to the extent of our understanding without worry whether we are going to be forgiven in the end or not. This is all, the rest is an artifice.

is given, the less precisely one can say what its momentum (position) is. This is a simplistic and preliminary formulation of the quantum mechanical uncertainty principle for position and momentum. The uncertainty principle played an important role in many discussions on the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics, in particular in discussions on the consistency of the so-called Copenhagen interpretation, the interpretation endorsed by the founding fathers Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr. See Werner Heisenberg, “Über quantentheoretische Umdeutung kinematischer und mechanischer Beziehungen,” Zeitschrift für Physik 33 (1925) 879–93; Niels H. D. Bohr, “The Quantum Postulate and the Recent Development of Atomic Theory,” Nature 121 (1928) 580–90; David C. Cassidy, Uncertainty, the Life and Science of Werner Heisenberg (New York: Freeman, 1992).