

# TOPICAL ISSUES OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

UDC 141.319.8:821.161.1Hohol

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## Hohol's Anthropological Project in the Russian Empire

**Purpose.** To reconstruct Hohol's point of view on his anthropological project, that is, to identify his answers to the question of what a person is in the dimensions of the essential and the proper. In other words, it is about clarifying Hohol's position on the principles of Ukrainian existence in the Russian empire. **Theoretical basis.** Our view of Hohol's legacy is based on the conceptual positions of phenomenology, existentialism and hermeneutics. **Originality.** For the first time, an attempt is made to study Hohol's legacy as a development of an anthropological project. In the process of its implementation, the authors reconstructed the main dimensions of this project, using the biography of the thinker, his correspondence, and texts. Close attention to the peculiarities of Hohol's anthropology allows us to approach the understanding of the theoretical paradoxes of the writer's worldview and the factors of his early death as a personal life tragedy of a patriot of Ukraine. The point is that Hohol, in the process of searching for forms of realising his high calling, set himself the task of substantiating a utopian goal. For him, the ways of building Russia as a great power involve the emasculation of the basic values of European culture and the humiliation of human dignity. **Conclusions.** In the course of the study of Mykola Hohol's works, the authors have identified: a) the importance of worldview and philosophical issues; b) the problems of man in his heritage. It is argued that Mykola Hohol, solving the problem of outlining the general features of human nature, at an early stage of his work demonstrated optimism and expressive life-affirming features rooted in Ukrainian centrism. Significant changes in our thinker's worldview led to his attempts to substantiate an alternative version of the European anthropological project, which involves justifying the insignificance of the average Russian citizen and the empire itself at the cost of denying the achievements of European philosophy and science. The painful experience of this theoretical dissonance was a prerequisite for Mykola Vasylyovych's early tragic death. Today, it is a kind of warning about the impossibility of combining Ukrainian and Russian culture, that is, the danger of a nihilistic attitude towards the achievements of European culture, of which Ukraine is an integral part. The authors associate the prospects for further study of Hohol's legacy with focusing on his: a) criticism of the Enlightenment and b) clarification of the forms of substantive rootedness of his work in Ukrainian philosophy, primarily in the teachings of Hryhorii Skovoroda.

*Keywords:* Hohol; vocation; anthropology; messianism; Orthodoxy; rationalism; Enlightenment; library

*Hohol was... a national martyr*  
Yevhen Malaniuk, 1992

## Introduction

Today, the question of the historical role of individual nations is one of the most crucial. First and foremost, we are talking about the fate of Ukraine, which has been waging a war of liberation against its aggressor neighbour for more than a decade. Many of our contemporary compat-

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riots still have dangerous illusions about the possibility of an organic union between Ukraine and Russia. As a rule, the instructive experience of our brilliant predecessors remains in the shadows. One of the most underrated representative figures of the past is the world-famous writer Mykola Hohol. His legacy is valuable to us as a form of manifestation of the heroic spirit of the Ukrainian people, their eternal desire for freedom and a decent life.

A close acquaintance with the research literature on the interpretation of this issue in the genius of Mykola Hohol gives an opportunity to make sure that it is based on a certain paradox that has not yet been addressed. It is about the existence in the minds of our contemporaries of contradictory answers to the question of his position on the problem of national identity. For Ukrainians, he is primarily a representative and exponent of the freedom-loving spirit of the Ukrainian people, its glorious history and basic values, while Russians tend to perceive him as a mouthpiece for the idea of Russian messianism.

To destroy the myth of Mykola Hohol as an ardent supporter of the idea of Russian messianism, it is necessary to emphasise the superficiality and fallacy of this position. We have already comprehended Hohol's dehumanisation of the human image in European philosophy as a prerequisite for the justification of Russian messianism (Malivskyi & Snitko, 2022). The concentrated form of expression of Mykola Hohol's worldview is his anthropological project. Paying attention to it will give us a chance to understand more deeply both the theoretical factors behind the failure of this project and the writer's own tragedy – his early death.

### Purpose

To reconstruct Hohol's point of view on his anthropological project, that is, to identify his answers to the question of what a person is in the dimensions of the essential and the proper. In other words, it is important to find out how Hohol sees the principles of Ukrainian existence in the Russian empire.

The realization of this goal involves solving the following tasks: a) to emphasize the importance of worldview and philosophical issues for Hohol; b) to outline the originality of Hohol's anthropological project at the stage of Ukrainocentrism; c) to reconstruct the basic principles of Hohol's anthropological project in Russia, which involves attention to the way he reinterpreted European culture.

### Statement of basic materials

For researchers of Hohol, the theses about the mystery of his personality, work, and early death have always been axiomatic. In our opinion, today we should first of all focus on his religiosity and the closely related idea of his special mission.

Of key importance is the fact that Hohol, like his European contemporaries, was intensively searching for a modern version of the answer to the question of what a person is and what the ways and means are to improve him or her. A substantive prerequisite for solving these problems is focusing on human self-knowledge and understanding a person as a representative of a particular cultural and historical community.

One of the indisputable signs of Hohol's position as a deep thinker is the worldview and philosophical questions frequently found in his fiction and journalistic works. From the pages of the *Author's Confession*, we learn about the vital importance of a number of questions for him: "Why? Why is this? What should this character say? What should be expressed by this phenomenon? The question is: what should one do when such questions come? Drive them away?"

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(Gogol, 1978a, p. 428). The writer amplifies and deepens the sound of those problems that are a manifestation of his tantalising torment. The evidence and manifestation of this is the obsessive (close to pathological) repetition of a number of questions: "Why...? Why...? Why...?". The final chord is the question of why and how the writer found himself in a situation of absurdity (dead end)? (Gogol, 1978a, p. 441).

In the process of getting acquainted with Hohol's legacy, we are indisputably aware of the fact that he paid special attention to the phenomenon of man, as well as to the representatives of: a) the Socratic line in Western European philosophy and b) the national philosophical tradition represented by Hryhorii Skovoroda. As a subtle psychologist and connoisseur of human souls, Hohol emphasises the importance of interest in human beings as a kind of common denominator: "Everyone feels, more or less, that he is not in the state he should be in, although he does not know what this desired state should consist of. But this desired state is sought by everyone..." (Gogol, 1978a, p. 443).

As Hohol himself admits in a private letter, from a young age he had an urgent need to observe man (Gogol, 1978, p. 324). Specifying his priorities, which are conditioned by the current decline of man, he emphasises that, first of all, the fateful question is important for him: is modern man capable of high feelings? In other words, for him, the inner man, namely the "higher qualities of human nature", has an unconditional priority (Gogol, 1978a, p. 429).

In defining his ideal of man, Hohol uses phrases that, for educated historians of philosophy, indicate his familiarity with the legacy of Aurelius Augustine. On the pages of *Dead Souls* we read about the importance of knowing "what is inside a person" (Hogol, 2007, p. 333), and learn that the ideal for a person is "a high inner man" (Hogol, 2007, p. 341). We repeatedly encounter forms of denoting those states that result from falling away from God.

In *Author's Confession (Avtorskaya Ispoved)*, Mykola Hohol repeatedly returns to his life credo, emphasising the importance of observing human nature and studying the general laws of the human soul (Gogol, 1978a, pp. 431-432). Concretising his exaggerated authorial ambitions as a thinker who is called upon to radically change the world, Hohol writes about himself as a genius capable of cutting the Gordian knot.

In outlining the peculiarity of Hohol's worldview at the first stage of his work, it is also worth noting its "Ukrainocentrism". Our approach to the writer's legacy as an anthropological project involves focusing on this feature. Here it is appropriate to refer to the basic principles formulated by Yevhen Malaniuk 70 years ago. It is about rejecting the established image of Hohol as a humourist and satirist who solves the problem of making the audience laugh. He is, in the researcher's deep conviction, a "national martyr" (Malaniuk, 1992, p. 77). His main indisputable merit is the actualisation of the national idea of Ukrainians: Hohol "raised the issue of national 'life and death'". Moreover, Hohol's legacy is a constructive elaboration of this aspect: "Mykola Hohol's creative work ... is the only indivisible ... in the mainstream of the Ukrainian ... cultural process" (authors' transl.) (Malaniuk, 1992, p. 76).

It is worth paying attention to the ideas of Hohol's text, written at the peak of his Ukrainocentrism (1833-34), "A View of the Composition of Malorossia". Here, he emphasises the existence of a period of history when there were two substantially different russias, which had no contact with each other, had different laws, customs and goals, showing us two fundamentally different characters (Gogol, 1978d, p. 57).

Hohol's private correspondence presents vivid and unambiguous manifestations of Ukrainocentrism. Without concealing his sympathies and curiosity, he voiced his sincere admiration for

the history of Ukraine: "...I have started writing the history of our unique poor Ukraine. Nothing calms one as much as history" (Gogol, 1978, p. 93). The mere mention of Ukraine evokes a positive emotional (pathos) reaction in him, as evidenced by his letter to Maksymovych: "There, there! To Kyiv! In ancient, in beautiful Kyiv! It is ours, not theirs, is it not?" (Gogol, 1978, p. 95).

Thus, it is in Ukrainocentrism that Hohol finds artistic forms of expressing his position as a patriot of Ukraine as a representative of an ancient, great and powerful, original and freedom-loving people. Hohol's innermost desire was to live in Ukraine, speak Ukrainian, study and teach Ukrainian history at the then newly founded Kyiv University.

However, the realisation of the impossibility of realising his ambitions in enslaved Ukraine led to Hohol's move to russia. And since the representatives of the imperial authorities saw Hohol's anthropological interest as a threat to the empire, they made it impossible for the thinker to realise his aspirations. For Mykola Hohol, the only possible way to defend the original values and aspirations of the Ukrainian people was through: a) his fiction and drama; b) stage performances.

It is known that Hohol had great hopes for *The Government Inspector*. However, his hopes for quick and positive changes in the souls of the play's audience proved to be in vain, as the theatre audience did not "notice" the main thing. The disappointed writer leaves russia and goes to Italy. There he continues to work on *Dead Souls*. The latter, according to the author, is a grandiose project of building russia as a great and powerful state.

While studying the problem of the proper foundations of russia as a great power of the future, the thinker faced a dilemma. He was forced to choose between two options: the first was a modest assessment of russia's current state and its role as a student of Western European culture; the second was a rejection of rational arguments and an appeal to emotions. The form of manifestation of the second line chosen by him involves emphasising russia's powerful (fantastic and still neglected) potential. A significant obstacle to the realisation of this potential is the doctrine of world history, which was based on the teachings of Hegel and Chaadayev, who denied russia's claim to belong to the historical nations. We outlined this position of Hohol in more detail earlier (Malivskyi & Snitko, 2022).

In the process of thoroughly comprehending the "bright" prospects of Russia, Hohol faced a difficult problem: why is there still no sufficient evidence to confirm the validity of his conviction? While in Italy, he literally bombarded his Russian addressees with requests to report on those vivid events and incidents that could claim to be empirical evidence of his vision. However, their absence largely led to the sad statements that are so numerous on the pages of the drafts of the second volume of *Dead Souls*.

Hohol found himself in a dead end, because he simultaneously nihilistically assessed the achievements of European culture and recognised their importance. He was in no hurry to give a definitive answer about how to relate to Europe, linking it to self-knowledge of himself as a Russian person and the originality of russia. The results he obtained, as evidenced by the writer's texts and the tragic end of his life, were unsatisfactory. Therefore, let us dwell in more detail on Hohol's position on the basic principles of anthropology.

The first thing that attracts Hohol's attention in a modern European is his exaggerated ambitions. He qualifies them as pride, or rather, the pride of the mind. First of all, this refers to those European ambitions that are associated with the cult of reason, which results in the reduction of culture to a body of knowledge. On this basis, Hohol qualifies the culture of his time as an incar-

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nation of the devil. The attractiveness of this diagnosis of culture for Hohol is related to the possibility of feeling superior to Europe and having sufficient grounds to emphasise the existence of russia's powerful virtual potential.

In this situation, Hohol himself painfully experienced physical suffering from: on the one hand, a strong desire to find convincing, universally relevant evidence of the truth of his voluntarist assumptions; on the other hand, an inner unwillingness to accept them and agree with them, being a man of common sense and having a Ukrainian soul. He experiences a strong internal resistance to the realisation of these aspirations, as evidenced by his appeal to the image of the miraculous "bird-troika" that is supposed to take him beyond the sad and stale atmosphere of russia. It is representative that this image of a fairy tale bird appears repeatedly in his texts. It refers both to the closing lines of the first volume of *Dead Souls* and to the end of his *Diary of a Madman*.

It is important for us to note that Hohol's split soul includes a prejudice against Europe and its culture, which was (and he was well aware of this) related to the culture of Ukraine. One of the most representative manifestations of the absurdity of Hohol's position is the way he interpreted the specifics of science. The paradoxical nature of the writer's opinion is noteworthy: on the one hand, he acknowledges the absence of serious russian science, and on the other hand, he is completely and unquestioningly convinced of its original superiority to European science. The author's credo is that "*only in one russian head is it possible to create science as science, and the russian mind will get into its own juice*". Hohol seeks to give this purely hypothetical assumption an axiomatic form: "*complete impartiality is possible only in the russian mind, and the comprehensiveness of the mind can only be accessible to a russian...*". Moreover, those long and extensive arguments based on the deductive method appear to be superfluous to russian nature. By avoiding conventional argumentation, Hohol allows himself to be dismissive of Germans and German philosophy. And since, he writes, "we cannot go step by step as the German goes", he makes a leap of faith, ignoring the requirements of logic and proclaiming the thesis that "any presentation of science is unsuccessful in the course of German philosophy" (authors' transl.) (Gogol, 1978b, p. 384).

For Hohol, science and philosophy are the main factor in the human crisis. The main flaw of science here is its abstraction from life. Therefore, Hohol tends to interpret philosophy itself, which is built on the basis of science, as a kind of scholasticism detached from life. In support of this thesis, he notes that in general philosophical terms, thought "*wanders like in labyrinths and moves away from the matter*" (authors' transl.) (Gogol, 1978b, p. 398). It is appropriate to draw attention to the second volume of *Dead Souls*, where the author contrasts "ordinary human cognition" of philosophy with the artificial construction of air castles (Hohol, 2007, p. 339).

Describing the process of European decline, Hohol spares no colour to emphasise its hopelessness and futility. Noting that "man is not God", and therefore is not the bearer of perfection, the author emphasises that, in a man as a creature who seeks primarily new pleasures any new knowledge increases his/her need for new pleasures. Hohol deliberately distances himself from the contemporary level of philosophical science in Europe and biasedly distorts its key values. He demonstrates a nihilistic attitude towards the vision of man as a rational being common in European classical philosophy. In place of this interpretation, the writer offers an understanding of man as the embodiment of passions. He is also close to the Romantics' position of linking the factors of the human crisis to the overestimation of the capabilities of the mind.

For Hohol, man as the embodiment of passions is still a mystery. In this context, let us recall Chapter XI of *Dead Souls*, in which the author emphasises the falsity and danger of widespread

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illusions about the unconditional dominance of man over his passions. Hohol voices the opposite idea – the idea of dependence. Of particular importance for a person, he writes, are those passions that he or she does not choose... For the author, it is obvious that the fate of Chichikov and the poem itself is connected with passions... Outlining the hero's hidden addiction, the author voices one of the main problems in the form of a rhetorical question: "*So what is the incomprehensible secret force driving me towards you?*" (Hohol, 2007, p. 316).

Describing the protagonist of *Dead Souls*, Chichikov, Hohol (2007) mentions the callousness of his nature and dulled feelings, qualifying his state with the words "mental hibernation" (p. 389). Sad thoughts arise in the readers of *Dead Souls* when they get to know the image of the Russian on the pages of the poem – he or she is completely deprived of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Those characters of the poem who are called upon in the second volume of the work to pave a new bright road for Russia cannot overcome their doubts and pessimism: "*The present-day Russian... is helpless without a driver. Without one he falls asleep, and the mould grows over him*". It is difficult for them to get rid of obsessive thoughts that Russians are created and conceived as the embodiment of negativity: "*Often I think there is no hope for the present-day Russian. While desiring to do everything, he accomplishes nothing*" (Hohol, 2007, pp. 382-383).

A striking example of the internal contradiction of Hohol's worldview is the presence of opposing statements on the pages of *Selected Passages*.... Here, the author, as an educated European, voices his distrust and healthy scepticism about the naïve belief in a bright future of his contemporaries, which is based only on their good intentions: "Fool is someone who thinks about the future today... we do not look to the present. Everyone has forgotten that the way and road to this bright future are hidden in this dark and confusing present..." (Gogol, 1978c, p. 285). In this situation, Hohol, neglecting trust in reason as a basic value of European civilisation, focuses exclusively on religion as the main type of worldview. He had a strong belief in the reliability of his own thoughts, which are "a sign of God's heavenly mercy" to him. For him, these thoughts are unquestionable and deserve absolute trust because they have arisen from the very depths of the soul (Gogol, 1978c, pp. 188-189). By renouncing reason as a basic value of European civilisation, he subjectivises the problem of the main factors of Russia's decline to the maximum extent possible. Seeing the main flaw of modernity in the forgetfulness of God, he urges: "Pray to God..." (Gogol, 1978c, p. 196).

Today, as well as 200 years ago, the obvious and undeniable traits of a Russian include aggression, envy and the destruction of everything that goes beyond their usual grey and hopeless routine. The current realities confirm the validity of Pyotr Chaadayev's observation about the absence of history in Russia and the inability of Russians to learn from history. The most recent examples include the destruction of the shrine of Ukrainian culture, the National Literary and Memorial Museum of Hryhorii Skovoroda, which housed a monograph by one of the authors (Malivskyi, 2019) dedicated to the founder of European modern philosophy, René Descartes. It is undeniable that the ideas of open knowledge, whose founders include René Descartes, are no less aggressive in modern Russia (Kolesnykova & Malivskyi, 2022). An equally blatant example is the closure in 2017 of the only library of Ukrainian literature in Russia (Gordon, 2016), whose collection included Hohol's books in Ukrainian. These individual examples and manifestations illustrate the importance of turning to the creative heritage of those thinkers who demonstrated the incommensurability of Ukrainian and Russian culture, i.e. the fallacy of the delusion that they can be organically combined.

## Originality

For the first time, an attempt is made to study Hohol's legacy as a development of an anthropological project. In the process of its implementation, the authors, referring to the thinker's legacy, reconstructed the main points of this project. Focusing on the peculiarities of Hohol's anthropological project allows us to approach the understanding of the theoretical paradoxes of the writer's worldview and the personal factors of his early death as a personal life tragedy of a patriot of Ukraine. It is about Hohol's intention to substantiate a utopian goal in the process of searching for forms of realisation of his high calling. For him, the development of Russia as a great power is possible only through the emasculation of the basic values of European culture and the humiliation of human dignity.

## Conclusions

In the course of the study of Mykola Hohol's heritage, the authors demonstrate: a) the centrality of worldview and philosophical issues and b) the problems of man in his/her essential and proper aspects. It is argued that Hohol paid great attention to the attempt to outline the general features of human nature, which at the early stage of his work had distinct life-affirming features based on Ukrainian centrism.

Significant changes in the writer's and thinker's worldview led to his unsuccessful attempt to reconcile personal ambitions with the conditions of Russian imperial reality. One of the most obvious forms of its dissatisfaction is Hohol's futile intention to substantiate an alternative to the European version of the anthropological project. The realisation of this absurd intention involved justifying the insignificance of the average citizen of Russia and the empire at the cost of denying the achievements of European philosophy and science.

This dissonance became a prerequisite for Mykola Vasylyovych's creative crisis and early death. They still serve as a warning about the danger of a superficial and nihilistic attitude to the achievements of European culture, of which Ukraine is an integral part.

The authors associate the prospects for further study of Hohol's legacy with focusing on his: a) criticism of the anthropological project of the Enlightenment and b) clarification of the forms of substantive rootedness of his work in Ukrainian philosophy, primarily in the teachings of Hryhorii Skovoroda.

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## Антропологічний проєкт Гоголя в російській імперії

**Мета.** Реконструювати точку зору Гоголя щодо його антропологічного проєкту, тобто виявити його відповіді на питання про те, що собою являє людина у вимірах суцього та належного. Інакше кажучи, йдеться про з'ясування позиції Гоголя щодо принципів існування українця в російській імперії. **Теоретичний базис.** Наш погляд на спадщину Гоголя базується на концептуальних положеннях феноменології, екзистенціалізму та герменевтики. **Наукова новизна.** Вперше зроблена спроба вивчити спадщину Гоголя як розробку антропологічного проєкту. В процесі її реалізації автори, звертаючись до біографії мислителя, його листування та текстів, реконструювали основні виміри цього проєкту. Уважне ставлення до особливостей



## TOPICAL ISSUES OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

антропології Гоголя дозволяє наблизитися до розуміння теоретичних парадоксів світогляду письменника та чинників його ранньої смерті як особистої життєвої трагедії патріота України. Йдеться про те, що Гоголь в процесі пошуку форм реалізації свого високого покликання поставив перед собою задачу — обґрунтувати утопічну мету. Для нього шляхи розбудови росії як великої держави передбачають вихолощення базових цінностей європейської культури та приниження гідності людини. **Висновки.** В ході дослідження творів Миколи Гоголя автори виявили: а) важливість світоглядно-філософських питань; б) проблеми людини в його спадщині. Аргументовано, що Микола Гоголь, вирішуючи задачу окреслення загальних рис природи людини, на ранньому етапі творчості демонстрував оптимізм та виразні життєстверджуючі риси, укорінені в україноцентризмі. Істотні зміни в світогляді нашого мислителя зумовили його намагання обґрунтувати альтернативний європейському варіант антропологічного проєкту, що передбачає виправдання нікчемності пересічного жителя росії та й самої імперії ціною заперечення здобутків європейської філософії та науки. Болісне переживання цього теоретичного дисонансу стало передумовою ранньої трагічної смерті Миколи Васильовича. Нині вона є своєрідним попередженням про неможливість поєднати українську культуру та культуру росії, тобто небезпеку нігілістичного ставлення до здобутків європейської культури, невід'ємною складовою якої є Україна. Перспективи подальшого дослідження спадщини Гоголя автори пов'язують із зосередженням уваги на його: а) критиці Просвітництва та б) з'ясуванні форм змістовної укоріненості його творчості в українській філософії, насамперед у вченні Григорія Сковороди.

*Ключові слова:* Гоголь; покликання; антропологія; месіанство; православ'я; раціоналізм; Просвітництво; бібліотека

Received: 19.07.2024

Accepted: 25.11.2024