

N. A. BERDYAEV (BERDIAEV)

THE FUNDAMENTAL IDEA OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF LEV SHESTOV

(1938 - #439)

Several times already I have written in the pages of "Put'" about Lev Shestov. But here is a demand to speak otherwise about him, and to honour his memory. Lev Shestov was a philosopher, who philosophised with all his being, and for whom philosophy was not an academic specialisation, but rather a matter of life and death. He was consistent of mind. And it was striking, his independence from the surrounding tendencies of the times. He sought God, he sought the liberation of man from the forces of necessity. And this was his personal problem. His philosophy belonged to the existential type of philosophy, i.e. it did not objectify the process of knowledge, it did not tear it asunder from the subject of knowing, it tied it together with the integral judgement of man. Existential philosophy signifies the remembrance of the philosophising subject, who incorporates existential experience into his philosophy. This type of philosophy presupposes, that the mystery of being is comprehensible only within the human existential condition. For Lev Shestov the human tragedy, the terrors and suffering of human life, the surviving of hopelessness, were all at the basis of philosophy. It ought not to be exaggerated as something new, that which they term existential philosophy, or that it derives from certain currents of contemporary German philosophy. This element is something possessed by all genuine and noteworthy philosophers. Spinoza philosophised via a geometric method and his philosophy can produce the impression of being a cold objective philosophy. But philosophic knowledge was for him a matter of salvation, and his *amor Dei intellectualis* in no way belongs to objective scientific-form truths. By the way, the attitude of L. Shestov towards Spinoza was very interesting. Spinoza was his enemy, one with whom he struggled all his life, as though a temptation. Spinoza -- was representative of human reason, a destroyer of revelation. And at the same time, L. Shestov very much loved Spinoza, constantly he had him in mind, and often he quoted him. In his final years, L. Shestov had a very remarkable encounter with Kierkegaard. He earlier had never read him, he knew him only by hearsay, and did not even consider perchance the influence of Kierkegaard on his thought. But when he read him, he became then deeply agitated, he was struck by the closeness of Kierkegaard to the fundamental theme of his life. And he came to number Kierkegaard among his heroes. His heroes were Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Luther, Pascal and the Biblical heroes -- Abraham, Job, Isaiah. Just as it was with Kierkegaard, the philosophical theme of L. Shestov was religious, and just as with Kierkegaard, his chief enemy was Hegel. He went from Nietzsche to the Bible. And he all the more and more turned himself to Biblical revelation. The conflict of Biblical revelation and Greek philosophy became a fundamental theme of his pondering.

L. Shestov subordinated to the fundamental theme of his life everything, which he thought, and which also he spoke and wrote. He could look upon the world, he could produce evaluations of the thoughts of others exclusively within the context of his own theme, and entirely towards this he regarded and remade the world in relation to this theme. But how to formulate it? He was struck by the force of necessity over human life, which begets the terrors of life. The vulgar forms of necessity did not interest him, but rather the more subtle forms. The force of irreversible necessity has been idealised by philosophers, as reason and morals, as self-evident and generally-observed truths. Necessity is begotten by knowing. L. Shestov is

completely caught up by this thought, that the Fall into sin is connected with knowledge, with the knowledge of good and evil. Man ceases to be nourished off the tree of life and begins to be nourished off the tree of knowledge. And L. Shestov struggles against the force of knowledge, which makes man subject under the law, in the name of the liberation of life. This is a terrible sundering for paradise, for the free paradisaical life. But paradise is attained through the tension of conflict, through disharmony and hopelessness. In essence, L. Shestov is not at all against scientific knowledge, he is not against reason in everyday life. Not in this is his problematic. He was against the pretensions of science and reason to decide questions about God, about the liberation of man from the tragic anguish of human judgement, wherein reason and rational knowledge want to circumscribe potentiality. God first of all is limitless potentialities, and this is a basic definition of God. God is not bound by any sort of truths of necessity. The human person is a victim of the truths of necessity, of the law of reason and morals, a victim of the universal and the conventional.

God stands opposite the kingdom of necessity, the kingdom of reason. God is in no way limited, to nothing can He be subordinated, and for God rather everything is possible. L. Shestov posits here the problem, which yet disquieted the Scholastic medieval philosophy. Is God to be subordinated to reason, to truth and the good, or is truth and the good only that, which God posits? The first point of view derives from Plato, and upon it stands St. Thomas Aquinas. The second point of view was that defended by Dun Scotus. The first point of view is bound up with intellectualism, while the second is with voluntarism. L. Shestov had kinship with Dun Scotus, but he posits the problem far more radically. If God is, then there lays disclosed all possibility, then the truths of reason cease to be incontrovertible and the terrors of life cease to be victorious. Here we touch upon a chief matter in the Shestov theme. And with this is connected that profound tremulation, which characterises all the thought of Shestov. Could God act thus, so that what formerly was, might not be? This is something most incomprehensible for reason. It would be very easy to misunderstand L. Shestov. The poisoned Socrates could be resuscitated, and in this Christians believe. His bride could be restored to Kierkegaard, while Nietzsche could be cured of his terrible illness. But this is not altogether what L. Shestov wants to say. God could have done it thus, so that Socrates would not have been poisoned, that Kierkegaard would not have deprived of bride, that Nietzsche would not have been stricken with terrible illness. Is there possible an absolute victory over that necessity, which rational knowledge invests upon the past? L. Shestov was tormented by the irreversibility of the past, fear of the formerly occurred tormented him.

Indeed, everything connected with this theme about a necessarily compelling truth is bound up with the setting in opposition of Jerusalem and Athens, the setting of Abraham and Job in opposition to Socrates and Aristotle. When they attempted to unite reason, as developed by Greek philosophy, together with revelation, there occurred then an apostacising and stepping-away from faith, and theology has always done this. The God of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob, is replaced by the God of the theologians and the philosophers. Philo was the first betrayer. God was subordinated to reason, to necessity, to commonly-held truths. Therein perished Abraham, the hero of faith. L. Shestov was very close to Luther, to the Lutheran theme of salvation by faith alone. The deliverance of man cannot come from man himself, but only from God. God -- is the Deliverer. Deliverance occurs not by intellect, not by morals, not by human activity, but by faith. Faith signifies the miraculous for the necessary truths of reason. The heights bestir themselves from their places. Faith demands the irrational. The Apostle Paul also says this. Faith asserts a conflict, a paradox, as Kierkegaard loves to say. L. Shestov with great radicalism gave expression authentically to the existential and eternal problem. The paradoxicality of thought, the irony, to which L. Shestov constantly resorted

in his manner to write, prevented its comprehension. Sometimes they have understood it, but indeed backwards. This occurred, for example, with such a remarkable thinker as Unamuno, who much sympathised with L. Shestov.

The philosophic thought of L. Shestov encountered tremendous perplexity in its expression, and this engendered much misunderstanding. The difficulty was in the inability to express by words that which L. Shestov pondered concerning the fundamental theme of his life, the inexpressibility of the chief points. He often resorted to a negative form of expression, and this was more successful for him. It was the clear, against which he led the struggle. Positive forms of expression were more difficult. Human language is so very rationalised, so very predisposed to thought-forms engendered by the Fall-into-Sin -- to the knowledge of good and evil. The thought of L. Shestov, directed against the commonly-held, itself took on the form of the commonly-held. And this provided easy ammunition into the hands of the critics. We stand here before a profound and little investigated problem of communication of creative thought to another. Is that which is communicated something very primary and very consequential, or is it only secondary and transitory? This at present is a problem posited by existential philosophy. For it, this is a problem of the transference from the "I" to the "thou" in an authentic communality. For philosophy, which imputes itself to be rational, this problem does not present disquieting consequences as regards an universal reason. One way or another universal reason makes possible an adequate transfer of thought and knowledge from the one to the other. But in actuality reason is in steps, of varied qualities and dependent on the character of human existence, of existential experience. Will determines the character of reason. Whereupon then there is posited the question about the transfer of philosophic thought through the non-rational concept. And indeed at present rational concepts do not make for a communication from one to another. L. Shestov frankly was not interested by this problem and he did not write about it, since he was completely absorbed by the relationship of man and God, and not by the relationship of man and man. But his philosophy very acutely posits this problem, and he himself is beset by the problem of philosophy. His contradiction was in this, that he was a philosopher, i.e. a man of thought and knowledge, and he comprehended the tragedy of human existence, the negative apperception. He struggled against the tyranny of reason, against the force of knowledge which banished man out of paradise, yet he struggled upon the territory of that same knowledge, and resorted to the weaponry of that selfsame reason. In this is the difficulty of philosophy, which wants to be existential. And in the thick of this difficulty I see the merit of L. Shestov.

L. Shestov struggled for the person, for the individually unrepeatable, against the force of the general. His chief opponent was Hegel and the Hegelian universal spirit. In this he was akin to Kierkegaard, he was akin to the theme of Belinsky in his letters to Botkin, and especially to Dostoevsky. In this struggle is the right-truth of L. Shestov. In this struggle against the force of the commonly-held he was so radicalised, that what was veritable and saving for one he regarded as not veritable and not obligatory for another. In essence, he thought that each man has his own personal truth. But by this were posited all those problems of communication. A matter whether there be communication between people on the soil of true revelation, or is this communication only upon the ground of the truths of reason, as conformed to the conventional, on the soil of that which L. Shestov following upon Dostoevsky called the "allness"?

In the last days of his life Lev Shestov was imbued of heated thoughts, agitated and intense. And he shew the victory of spirit over the infirmity of body. His perhaps finest books, "Kierkegaard and Existential Philosophy", and "Athens and Jerusalem, an Essay of Religious

Philosophy”, were written by him in the final period of his life. Here is not the time to criticise the philosophy of my old friend Lev Shestov. One thing only I shall say. I am very sympathetic to the problematics of Lev Shestov and I find close to me his motif of the struggle against the force of the “common” over human life. But I always parted with him over the value of knowledge, and I do not see in it the source of oppressive necessity over our lives. Yet only in an existential philosophy can there be explained, what the matter of concern is here. The books of L. Shestov help to give an answer to the basic question of human existence, and within them there is existential significance.

NIKOLAI BERDYAEV.

1938

© 2000 by translator Fr. S. Janos

(1938 - 439 - en)

OSNOVNAYA IDEYA PHILOSOFII L'VA SHESTOVA. *Journal Put'*, 1938, nov./dec. 1938 / jan. 1939, No. 58, p. 44-48.

Reprint of article in 1964 was made by Paris YMCA-Press as preface to book entitled: “L. SHESTOV. *Umozrenie i otkrovenie*. Religioznaya filosofiya Vladimira Solov'eva i drugie stat'i”, 346 p. There likewise appeared 1963 German translation of this work under title, “L. SCHESTOV. *Spekulation und Offenbarung*”. Trad. de Hans Ruoff. Muenchen, Verlag Heinrich Ellermann, 1963, 458 p.

Reprinted by YMCA Press Paris in 1989 in Berdiaev Collection: “Tipy religioznoi mysli v Rossii”, (Tom III), ctr. 407-412.

Oorspronkelijke url

http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1938_439.html

daar verdwenen, nog wel in [google cache](#) op 22 dec 2015 23:49:33 GMT.