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Shestov and Berdyaev: A Comparison of two Russian Philosophers

The lives of Lev Shestov (Kiev, 1866-Paris, 1938) and of Nikolai Berdyaev (Kiev, 1874-Paris, 1948) seem to follow parallel paths, so numerous are the similarities between them. Both were born in Kiev; and during similar periods both lived first in St. Petersburg, then in Moscow (during the "Great War" and the Bolshevik Revolution) and finally in Paris. They first became acquainted -- probably in 1902 -- in Kiev, and their friendship ended only with the death of Shestov, in Paris, in 1938. Indeed, it was in Paris -- during the 1920s and 30s, when the French capital was at the height of its importance as the centre of European intellectual culture -- that these two Russian philosophers contributed so significantly to the establishment in the West of a free and independent Russian school of thought which was nonetheless firmly rooted in Russian tradition. In the early years of the 1920s, Berdyaev transferred to Paris the Religious-Philosophical Academy (*Religiozno-filosofskaja Akademija*) which he had originally set up in Berlin with the intention of pursuing the activities of the Free Academy of Spiritual Culture in Moscow. In 1925 he founded *Put'*, a magazine which continued to be published until 1940, and in which a number of exiled Russian intellectuals were able to freely express their ideas. Lastly, he also organized, at the Russian Centre on Boulevard Montparnasse, the first ecumenical encounters between Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians, with the involvement of well-known personalities such as J. Maritain, Father L. Gillet and S. Bulgakov, to name just a few. These meetings were followed by conferences in nearly every European country, attended by some of the most important philosophers and theologians of the time: from Charles du Bos and Etienne Gilson, Gabriel Marcel, to Andre Gide, Karl Barth, Andre Malraux and Emmanuel Mounier. Berdyaev felt particular affinity with the latter, and collaborated with him on the periodical *Esprit*. For his part, Shestov, although preferring to operate in private rather than in public, also followed and participated in many of Berdyaev's initiatives, forming important friendships with philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Jules de Gaultier. His friendship with Jacques Rivière brought him into the sphere of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* -- of which Rivière was director during that period and which was the veritable hub of French and European culture -- thus enabling Shestov to contribute significantly to making Dostoevsky's beliefs and works known in the West. Within a short space of time, both Berdyaev and Shestov became acclaimed in Europe as the two leading representatives of Russian existentialist thought.

While the impact that the endeavours of these two philosophers had on the spread of culture in

France is now clear; and while various studies on their thinking appeared -- particularly during the 1950s, when the concept of existentialism gained ground nearly everywhere -- the intellectual ties which bound the two are, however, not as clear, particularly insofar as their respective philosophies are concerned. On this subject, in fact, the two philosophers published a number of papers, for the most part in Russian, which formed a sort of intellectual repartee or sparring match, beginning during the period when both lived in Russia, and continuing over the years.

Bound, as they were, by a profound amity which was perhaps deepened by their sense of a shared destiny, they nonetheless, during the entire time they knew each other, had lively arguments on the thematics and on the philosophical interests which they shared -- a fundamental divergence which they never resolved. As Berdyaev, recalling his past, said:

Somewhat later I met another man, who came to be a great and life-long friend of mine, and whose friendship I valued immensely. He was Lev Shestov. I regarded him then and regard him now as one of the most remarkable men I was ever privileged to meet. His books were just beginning to appear, and I was particularly interested in his work on Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. We disagreed on many issues, but we were preoccupied with and disturbed by similar problems. Every time we met I was conscious of real companionship with him, of a kind of existential communion, of a common concern.[1]

The two men often met in St Petersburg -- then at the height of the turn-of-the-century "religious renaissance"-- to discuss various topics of interest to intellectual circles. One such circle was the famous "Ivanov's Tower", a group of very diverse personalities such as Berdyaev, Shestov, Bulgakov, Gershenzon and the poet Viacheslav Ivanov himself, who met at the latter's turreted house. Unlike the Slavophile and Occidentalist circles, which were united by a single idea, Ivanov's group was brought together by an authentic and profound desire for renewal, for suppression of prejudice, and for a disinterested search for the truth. Almost always, in such encounters, Berdyaev and Shestov found themselves arguing the same issue from opposing corners, the one accusing his opponent of excessive dogmatism, and the other denouncing his adversary's obstinate scepticism.

A series of letters exchanged between 1922 and 1924 [2] -- when Berdyaev, having been exiled by the Russian government, was in Berlin prior to permanently joining Shestov in Paris -- provides a good illustration not only of their controversial relationship, but also of their deep friendship. Shestov, during this time, was trying to help Berdyaev establish himself and find work in the French capital. Referring to a book on Pascal which Shestov had just published, Berdyaev wrote:

The book is very interesting, very well written, but provokes a sharp protest on my part. You persist in refusing to admit that the folly of Pascal and of the Apostle Paul was a folly in Christ. You have transformed grace into darkness and horror [...] Your translator, Schloezer, who shares your opinions, has written an account of my book on Dostoevsky in *Sovremennyye zapiski*. It is to be noted that what he says about me and against me could be said against every believer, every Christian.

He does not accept the fact of faith itself. Religion seems static and immobile to him. I think that it is atheism and scepticism which are static and immobile. I see *a way out* (which is what you object to above all), because I am a believing Christian, and I take my faith seriously, to the very end.[3]

Shestov's reply, some months later, naturally argued the opposite:

I disagree with you when, by means of a premise based entirely on reason, you transform an experience into a "truth" [...] Only the experience of death or the experience of tragedy opens man's eyes to the vanity of all earthly gifts, including morals. For you, that is all "darkness"; for me, on the contrary, the horror is that truth which men worship as though in adoration of an idol, since an idol may be made not only of wood, but also of ideas.[4]

1. A "Reasoned Folly"

The debate between the two "friendly adversaries" was destined to continue in Paris during the years which followed, particularly during the informal gatherings of friends (so famous, according to Pierre Pascal[5], that they were known as "Berdyaev's Sundays"), as well as during numerous private encounters. There were also, however, a number of so-called "official" encounters, during which the two debated on specific subjects. The first of these concerned an article about Shestov, written by Berdyaev and entitled "Tragedy and the Mundane"[6], later incorporated in his book *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*, and published in 1907 in St Petersburg. In the same year, Shestov's riposte promptly appeared in his article "The Praise of Folly (Regarding the book by Berdyaev: *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*)."[7] This was the first time Shestov tackled the theme of *folly*, in such explicit terms and with direct reference to Berdyaev; he would broach this subject again, some years later, in a text on William James.

"Not derisively, like the famous Erasmus of Rotterdam in earlier times," began Shestov's article, "but sincerely, from the depths of my heart, I begin my eulogy to folly. Berdyaev's new book has helped me enormously. He could, had he so wished, have chosen the title *The Praise of Folly*, as his long-dead colleague once did, since its purpose defies common sense." [8]

Berdyaev's work consisted of a collection of articles written over a period of six years, and thus revealed the author's changing convictions in many senses. For Shestov, in the first article, "The Fight for Idealism," Berdyaev still adhered closely to the Kantian point of view, "[...] that, as we know, acknowledges wisdom and all the virtues that accompany it." [9] Afterwards, the author progressively evolved and at the end of the book, openly declared war on wisdom, not pitting it against the usual "folly," however, but against "Great Reason."

"Evolution" was a characteristic which could be seen to some extent in all intellectuals, according to Shestov, and there were numerous examples of this: not only Berdyaev, but also Sergey Bulgakov converted to Christianity after having gone through a period of Marxism and economic materialism; not to mention Merezhkovsky, who also embraced Christianity without reservations, having abandoned, almost overnight, his previous convictions. In reality, looking closely -- as Shestov added -- one could see they were still the same: they had changed direction

too suddenly to be truly different, at heart. Rather like when an elderly man learns a new language and everyone can recognise that he is a foreigner from his accent, when these converts enunciated the word "Christ" they did so with the same intonation as they had once pronounced "Marx." In this way, declared the author, a well-tuned ear could distinguish how much more Christian was Rozanov -- who did not believe in Christ and did not accept the Gospel, but who grew up with and was educated in the precepts of Christian piety, never knowing the seductiveness of Darwinism or Marxism -- than Berdyaev, Bulgakov or Merezhkovsky, whose Kantian or metaphysical, Nietzschean or Christian beliefs changed nothing. They were destined to remain the same, despite the various labels under which they presented themselves from time to time.

Thus Berdyaev, in the end, could not and never would change his true nature, which was to contemplate the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, as the Spinoza-inspired title of his book declared; that is, to return, finally, to a solid berth which ultimately gave him the feeling of having the earth firmly beneath his feet. He was a writer of great talent, and that talent derived principally from "audacity,"[10] his greatest quality; but once he had lost that -- as almost always happens -- the fount of his inspiration would dry up. The same applied to folly which, in principle, Berdyaev used as a bulwark against *ratio*, singing its praises and glorifying it; but when the time came to go further, and fully acknowledge all its claims, he preferred to shelter behind the more reassuring and familiar "common sense."

A striking example of this was the article "Leontev, Philosopher of Reactionary Romanticism": which, for Shestov, was one of the best in the anthology in question. In Shestov's view, Berdyaev showed himself to be strongly attracted by Leontev's personality, by the supreme liberty of his spirit, by the delicacy of his thinking and by his great originality, but nevertheless refused to accept or approve him entirely, since to do so would be too risky: in such an instance, a categorical imperative came into play which demanded that he take account only of the *sole, eternal truth*, when forming his judgement. Thus, the approbation and fascination Berdyaev felt momentarily for the *capricious* but *subtle* and *desirable/attractive* folly in Leontev's work returned docilely to their place, and he chose, instead, caution. "The article", wrote Shestov, "so auspiciously begun, ends with a tentative truce between Folly and Wisdom, in which all the advantages are on the side of the latter. Berdyaev simply cannot fully admit that Folly has its own legitimate rights, outside all control, and beyond all limitation [...] Almost all of Berdyaev's articles follow the same pattern."[11]

According to Shestov, ambivalence thus appeared to be Berdyaev's fundamental characteristic. At the outset of his articles, on the one hand, Berdyaev railed with unequalled scorn against good sense, casting it from its pedestal and replacing it with liberating and triumphant folly. It was but a brief triumph, however. Towards the end "[...] Berdyaev invariably softens and restores to common sense, if not all, then at least a part of what it has always been acknowledged to deserve."[12] For these reasons, his book made everyone agree. It was a well-constructed book, produced with wisdom by a human mind which had based its theories and ideas on a thorough study of reality. This fundamental shrewdness, capable of uniting folly and sense in a solid yet artificial alliance, was one of Berdyaev's basic characteristics. Berdyaev's "human creation", his intention, Shestov implied, was to open the doors to a moderate folly that could add interest to a common sense as "deathly boring, grumpy as an old bigot [...]".[13]

But Truth (*Istina*), for Shestov, was far removed from all that. Truth could never be equated with a "human creation": all that sprang from the mind of man as a representation of the truth was, for the philosopher, automatically a lie (*lozh'*). One must go beyond that, to where good sense cannot undermine folly. Folly (*glupost'*) was, in itself, the origin, purity and fount of creation, a divine gift; yet it also indicated the way to truth. Berdyaev, and many others like him, were fully aware of this, but feared the "leap into the void", frightened of losing the advantages that common sense guaranteed to all, and so each invented a gentle, tamed madness -- in effect, a *reasoned* folly --, which suited his own particular case.

Berdyaev barred himself from the experience of truth, the free and unconditional openness to folly; in the final analysis he made everything contingent on ideas and morals -- in other words, on reason and the realm of common sense. In the article he dedicated to Merezhkovsky, "On a New Religious Conscience", Berdyaev dealt with the relationship between faith and reason, and all the dualisms related to it: science and divine creation; flesh and spirit; the pagan appeal of the world and Christian renunciation. Even though, as Shestov said, these problems in themselves are of great interest, both Berdyaev and Merezhkovsky systematically reduced them to a moral in the manner of Dostoevsky (although in so doing, Shestov added, proving that they had not understood Dostoevsky), and neither author realised that "the fundamental problem of humanity is not actually a moral problem." [14] Shestov described Merezhkovsky as a very cultured man, whose works represented an imposing amount of labour and effort, "[...] and yet the way in which he posed, and then resolved, the problem of Flesh and Spirit, of Heaven and Earth, is not particularly fundamental." [15] In other words, to demonstrate the sanctity of the Flesh and the Spirit, and of Heaven and Earth, he did not put any particular strain on the spirit, since even if one could provide even more convincing evidence to substantiate one's argument, the fundamental debate would nonetheless remain open. "The Spirit is holy", added Shestov, "the Flesh is holy, but what guarantee is there for us that what we have sanctified will remain holy in the face of eternity? And what if [...], knowing neither good nor evil, joy nor suffering, sanctity nor vice -- in short, without knowledge of the human condition -- this God were the beginning and the fount of life?" [16]

Berdyaev, it would appear, never asked himself such a question, according to Shestov: "His basic premise [...] is a hypothesis: that he will always find whatever he needs." [17] His faith was as solid as granite, and in this he resembled the critic Mikhailovsky, who had recently died and to whom Berdyaev dedicated another article of his book, paying tribute to him, expressing his gratitude, and acknowledging the spiritual kinship which bound him and others of his generation to the great critic. That Berdyaev should feel profoundly bound to Mikhailovsky was not particularly strange, Shestov remarked, since one had only to note that both shared complete faith in a universal moral order which was the natural result of man's ideas on what should or should not be, to understand how similar in their thinking the two actually were. Both were utterly certain that the only truth was "*pravda*" (truth), in other words, truth originating from justice and morals. Neither could ever admit the contrary: that real truth (*istina*) was one thing, and justice-truth (*pravda*) another. This being so, Shestov observed, they were unquestionably mistaken on one point in particular: "It is only through a misunderstanding that Berdyaev, Merezhkovsky and Bulgakov believe themselves to be Dostoevsky's successors." [18]

Finally, Shestov touched on the article dealing specifically with himself: "Tragedy and the Mundane." In response, he wrote:

With regard to my book, *Apotheosis of Groundlessness*, he numbers me among the sceptics, and with regard to *The Philosophy of Tragedy*, he classifies me as a pessimist. For that matter, other critics also attribute me with these sins. I would like to take this opportunity to declare (since there is no call here for debate) that, at the moment when, for the first time, I saw myself described as a sceptic and a pessimist, I quite simply had to rub my eyes in astonishment.[19]

Are sceptics, Shestov asked, perhaps those who do not believe in the great existing philosophies? Was it possible that "the man who seeks truth, but does not define as truth the first mistake he comes across"[20] would be defined as a sceptic? Berdyaev himself, Shestov assured us, continually changed opinion, going from one extreme to the other, yet no-one ever thought of accusing him of scepticism, since the ideas he advanced from time to time were presented as true and absolute, even though they might be revealed shortly afterwards as fallacy. Thus the point, said Shestov, was not the scepticism, but something else: the point, clearly, was to maintain a fundamental "shrewdness" and to colour every new-found idea with a dogmatism that could shield it from absolute doubt, from radical groundlessness: specifically, from folly. This type of "movable dogmatism,"[21] as Shestov called it, was typical of Berdyaev and of all those who, like him, were not *daring* enough to run the risk of true *folly*, without transforming it into "Great Reason", or into something else which was nonetheless akin to good sense, or to common sense. Real folly was something different: it had little to do with the cautious creations of a man determined, by any means, to reduce everything to reason. "Berdyaev often repeats the follies that everyone acknowledges -- widespread follies, habitual in a way", concluded Shestov. "In my opinion, it makes no sense. Habitual follies are as like as two drops of water to intelligent things. So is it worth worrying about them?"[22]

In another article, written a few months before his death, entitled "Nikolay Berdyaev. Gnosis and Existential Philosophy", Shestov revisited the theme of folly, extending it this time to include the concept of freedom. Having recognized Berdyaev's merit in having won himself a place among the greatest of his contemporary existential philosophers, such as Jaspers, Scheler, Hartmann and Heidegger, Shestov turned his attention to his friend's latest work, *Spirit and Reality*, exposing some of the claims contained therein. First and foremost, although Berdyaev referred to Kierkegaard as the inspiration for his theories, the sources were, in truth, quite different. According to Shestov, the main influence was Jacob Boehme's philosophy, which had been the trigger for a clear attempt by contemporary German philosophers to return to Kantian principles. It was, in fact, to Kant that Berdyaev referred with such insistence in his later works. Berdyaev's philosophical development over the last few years had evolved from his initial theocentric or Christian standpoint to a "theandric" one. But the latest "novelty", said Shestov, was that the importance of man became ever greater, while that of God was weakened progressively, to such a point that "the equation becomes unstable and is at risk of overturning: theanthropy is on the point of becoming 'anthropo-theism.'"[23] Thus although, on the one hand, Berdyaev -- in the manner of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor -- glorified freedom as God's greatest gift to man, on the other hand he did so from a strongly Gnostic viewpoint, basing his theories on the great German mystics such as Jacob Boehme, Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius,

Tauler, etc. In other words, he included even the concept of God-given freedom in the greater category of "spiritual understanding." "Knowledge, all knowledge, all gnosis, implies the acquisition of an informed, definitive experience. Berdyaev's opinions which I am about to cite can be defined a 'knowledge' precisely because this format -- universality and necessity -- concerns them." [24] This was the latest novelty in Berdyaev's thinking, as could be understood more by the tone than by the content: he may have talked of Ivan Karamazov's "brilliant dialectic", said Shestov, but unlike Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, he did not like to ponder on the searing questions of existence, preferring, instead, to concentrate on answers and ready-made solutions. "He avoided the very mention of 'the horrors of existence', and never touched on the insoluble, the 'no exit.'" [25] For the same reason, "the main task of philosophy (Christian philosophy, according to Berdyaev) is, in the first place, to devise a theodicy." [26]

The dreadful possibility which these "existential Gnostic philosophers" (whether Christian or not) wished to avoid at all costs was that, beyond folly and freedom, there existed an even more worrying concept: "Nothingness." This, however, was not a nothingness which would come before God and over which He would have no power, as these philosophers would have wished (thereby returning knowledge, and in particular knowledge of good, to its position of supremacy). Rather, as Shestov made clear, it was a *nothingness* which corresponded to God himself, with its fundamental quality being, so to speak, incomprehensibility. Fear, the impossibility of bearing the direct sight of this "nothingness", of this God, rather than a search for truth, was the true source of this type of philosophy. This was why these thinkers, Berdyaev included, were in such haste to invent a reasoned folly and a fettered freedom, Shestov explained. In reality however, he continued, man was created free by God, and that freedom lay precisely in the fact that man had no need for either knowledge or for distinction between good and evil: "Paradise is in no way poorer than fallen man's knowledge; it is qualitatively different and infinitely richer than all our learning [...]." [27] In this way, existential philosophy, unlike speculative philosophy, did not seek learning: "knowledge is thus no longer the only path to truth; learning itself transmutes into the problem, becomes problematic." [28]

2. Shestov's Fundamental Idea

In 1936, on the occasion of Shestov's seventieth birthday, Berdyaev published -- in the magazine *Put'* -- a short article dedicated to him, which summarized in a few concise points his basic opinion on his friend and fellow-citizen's philosophies. [29] "We are old friends with L. Shestov", Berdyaev wrote, "and here already for 35 years we have led with him a dialogue about God, about good and evil, about knowledge. This dialogue often was a fierce, though also friendly dispute. Dialogue with L. Shestov is difficult, since he is not a man of dialogue, he is a man of monologue." [30]

Nonetheless, he added, that very aspect was the source of his strength as a thinker, allowing him to condense extraordinary power and concentration into a single theme, and making his arguments both well thought-out and profoundly based on experience. Shestov's basic theme, according to Berdyaev, was both religious and biblical, as became clear in the concluding period of his oeuvre: "In God he wants to find free life, to be freed from the fetters of necessity, from the laws of logic and morals, which he makes responsible for the tragic fate of man." [31]

Interestingly, Berdyaev pointed out that Nietzsche had influenced Shestov more than any other author, although he was not Nietzschean in the usual sense of the term. According to Berdyaev, it was precisely that commixture of Nietzschean spirit with biblical themes, that willingness to debate religious questions with the reasoning germane to philosophy, which gave rise to the "intrinsic restlessness" in Shestov's thinking, and made him a philosopher in arms against philosophy itself: "He is always setting in opposition Hellenic philosophy vs. the Bible, Athens and Jerusalem, but he orients himself chiefly in the sphere of Hellenic philosophy, in the Athenians, whereas his Biblical thoughts and words are comparatively brief." [32]

In the end, this manner of proceeding, said Berdyaev, placed the true interest of Shestovian thought predominantly in the sphere of existence, from which it derived. At the same time, he said, only negative philosophy was expressed and given space in his works, while the positive philosophy "is indigent and short, and it could perhaps fit on half a page." [33]

This was made clear in the most beautiful -- according to Berdyaev -- of Shestov's books, *Kierkegaard and Existential Philosophy*, in which the Russian philosopher declared that no cognitive act could be defined as authentic knowledge, and claimed, like Luther, that only Faith could be recognized as such. No other refuge from the strength of necessity existed. But, asked Berdyaev, how and by whom could such a Faith possibly ever be held?

Reading L. Shestov gives the impression that faith is impossible and that no one has it, with the exception of Abraham alone, who held the knife over his beloved son Isaac. L. Shestov does not believe, that so-called "believers" have faith. Even the great saints do not have it. No one that moves mountains. Faith does not depend on man, it is sent by God. To nearly no one does God give faith, for He did not give it to Kierkegaard, nor did He give it to any of Shestov's tragic heroes. The sole pathway appears hidden. L. Shestov composed for himself a maximalist concept about faith, under which it is rendered impossible and that no one can have it. [34]

For Berdyaev, even Shestov's most successful book -- in which he managed to establish a link between his own personal legend and that of the creation of the world, and the fall from grace -- demonstrated clearly how futile his proposition was; as contradictory as it was sterile. "L. Shestov preaches the passivity of man. Man for him is sinful, but not culpable because he is not responsible, because he is passive. God alone is active, but God discloses nothing about Himself in the world." [35]

"The chief philosophical error of L. Shestov that I see," Berdyaev added further, "is in this, that he does not make distinctions in the forms and levels of knowledge." [36]

Berdyaev returned to these concepts two years later, with another short article written on the occasion of Shestov's death, in 1938. This article, entitled "The Fundamental Idea of the Philosophy of Lev Shestov," [37] had, given the circumstances, a much different tone to previous articles, and perhaps for that very reason it was easier to understand, from Berdyaev's point of view, the differences and points in common between the two authors. It was exactly with this premise ("now there is a need to speak of him differently and to honour his

memory"[38]) that Berdyaev's article opened, asserting that Shestov was a thinker "who philosophized with his whole being, for whom philosophy was not an academic specialty but a matter of life and death." [39] In this sense, his philosophy could be defined as existential, even though he disliked this label, precisely because it did not make the process of cognition objective, but bound it indissolubly to the judgement of man. Thus, "existential philosophy signifies a keeping in mind of the existential nature of the philosophizing subject, a subject who includes his existential experience in his philosophy. This type of philosophy presupposes that the mystery of being is comprehensible only in human existence." [40]

Equally, for Shestov, the human tragedy, the terror and suffering of existence, were at the root of philosophy: and that very element, in truth, had always belonged to all those who could be called authentic philosophers. Spinoza, for example, recalled Berdyaev, could have been -- and to a great extent was -- Shestov's "adversary" *par excellence*, due to the impression of frigid objectivity which his thinking could give. Yet Shestov, while harshly criticizing him, saw in him something that went beyond his *amor Dei intellectualis*, seeing perhaps another "travelling companion" for whom philosophy was above all the stuff of life, and often cited him in his works, at times almost with the same reverence as he accorded to his lifelong "heroes": Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Luther, Pascal and biblical characters such as Abraham, Job and Isaiah. To this list is added, in an almost casual way but with a fundamental impact, the name of Kierkegaard, whose works Shestov only discovered during the last years of his life. He never understood, remarked Berdyaev, how he had managed to remain unaware of and underrate Kierkegaard for so many years, and he suddenly became aware how similar, if not identical, their paths had been.

"He went from Nietzsche to the Bible", Berdyaev commented. "More and more he turned to biblical revelation. The conflict between biblical revelation and Greek philosophy became the fundamental theme of his thinking." [41] Everything came second to this theme, on which he wrote, spoke and thought for an entire life. To such an extent, indeed, that "he could consider the world and evaluate the thinking of others exclusively from within his theme," [42] that is to say, the fact that man's fall from grace was related to knowledge, the knowledge of good and evil. "Man ceased to feed on the Tree of Life and began to feed on the Tree of Knowledge. And so Shestov attacks the power of knowledge, which subordinates man to law, and he does so in the name of the liberation of life." [43]

For all that, Shestov cannot be defined as an irrationalist in the absolute sense of the term. Rather, for him, it was a matter of imposing limits on God through the use of reason: it was this which he considered unacceptable.

Over against the domain of necessity, the domain of reason, stands God. God is not bound by anything, He is not subject to anything. For God all things are possible. Here Shestov poses a problem that had already disturbed the scholastic philosophy of the Middle Ages. Is God subordinate to reason, the truth and the good, or is only that true and good which God considers such? [44]

The first point of view originated with Plato, and reached its zenith with St Thomas Aquinas, said Berdyaev; the second, on the other hand, began with Duns Scotus, to whom, in fact,

Shestov made frequent reference in his reflections. Indeed, this was the starting point for his analyses comparing Athens to Jerusalem, Abraham and Job to Socrates and Aristotle, and finally the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to the God of theologians and philosophers. In a certain way, the entire story Shestov narrated is based on how it could happen that faith in God could be replaced by faith in Reason and in Science/Knowledge. True Faith, on the contrary, specifically required the irrational, as, for example, Kierkegaard and the Apostle Paul often made clear. In this sense, "Shestov brought to expression, with great radicalism, a truly existing and eternal problem." [45] But it was the way in which he did so, Berdyaev repeated, that perplexed so many of his readers -- among them Unamuno, despite the instinctive affinity he felt towards him.

The difficulty consisted in the inexpressiveness of words regarding what Shestov thought about the basic theme of his life, the inexpressiveness of the most important thing. He frequently had resort to the negative form of expression and was more successful with it. What he struggled against was clear. But the positive form of expression was more difficult. [46]

Yet it was true, Berdyaev added, that this very characteristic perhaps enabled Shestov to grasp the true crux of existential philosophy: that the communicable content of knowledge was of secondary value only, while logical and rational thought remained existential.

His inconsistency lay in the fact that he was a philosopher, i.e., a man of thought and knowledge, and while he denied knowledge, he came to know the tragedy of human existence. Against the tyranny of reason, against the power of knowledge, which drove man out of paradise, he battled on the territory of this very knowledge with the weapons of this very same reason. [47]

Therein, for Berdyaev, lay the difficulty of a philosophy -- such as Shestov's -- intended to be authentic existentialism. Yet also therein lay the merit of Shestov, who fought all his life in favour of the unique and unrepeatable individual. His true adversary was thus Hegel and the Hegelian universal Spirit, and his greatest allies Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. It was this which could rightly be called Shestov's fundamental theme, according to Berdyaev: it was his sole idea, in the context of which he coherently, perseveringly -- and, on occasion, obstinately -- considered everything, invariably reaching the heart of the problem. It was not by chance, observed Berdyaev, that he wrote his most profound and successful books (*Athens and Jerusalem* and *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*) in the final intense and hectic years of his life, when he felt most deeply within himself the triumph of the universal spirit over bodily infirmity. He concluded:

Now is not the time to criticize the philosophy of my old friend Lev Shestov. I would like to say only one thing. I have a great sympathy for Shestov's problematic, and the motive of his struggle against the power exercised over human life by the 'universal' is dear to me. But I have always had another view than he in the evaluation of knowledge, in that I do not see in it the source of the necessity hanging over our life. Only existentialist philosophy can explain what the case here is. Lev Shestov's books help give an answer to the basic question of human

existence; in them there is existential significance.[48]

Some years after the appearance of this article -- which was later added as the preface to the posthumous edition of Shestov's book *Speculation and Revelation*[49] -- Berdyaev revisited, in what was perhaps his most important work, *The Russian Idea*, the topic of his friend and travelling companion. He wrote of Shestov:

[...] He was a man with one idea, and one unique theme, which entirely dominated and pervaded everything he wrote. He was not so much a Hellene as a Judaeon, he represented Jerusalem, not Athens. His origins were in Dostoevsky, in Tolstoy and in Nietzsche. [...] He was a philosopher who fought against philosophy, against Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, against Spinoza, Kant and Hegel. His heroes were those rare beings who had lived through profound devastation: Isaiah, the Apostle Paul, Pascal, Luther, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard.[50]

Finally, Berdyaev acknowledged that Shestov belonged to the "Russian idea", with his call for divine and human liberty, and above all with his pursuit of the Dostoevskian themes on the underlying nature man, and the conflict between man and earthly harmony. Taking this central Shestovian theme of the unremitting and tragic opposition between the individual and universal harmony, and using it as the ultimate proof of Shestov's affiliation with the Russian spirit and idea, Berdyaev revealed what was, in his opinion, the core of Shestov's identity:

The most captivating aspect in L. Shestov, is that throughout the extent of his literary activity he never accommodated himself to anything or anyone, he never vulgarised his thought, he never tried to socially conform it. In this is a mark of his nobility. Without having belonged to any current he nonetheless belongs to the Russian spiritual renaissance of the early 20th Century and he is one of the most unique thinkers of this epoch.[51]

3. Concluding Remarks

The reasons for the two philosophers' differing theories appear most clearly in their own words. Berdyaev reproved Shestov for not having given sufficient weight to the problem of knowledge in his thinking, expounding at length in the "pars destruens" phase, but following up with very little ("perhaps half a page", said Berdyaev) in the positive phase. For his part, Shestov appeared more to criticize the intentions, or, to put it better, the *implied premises*, of Berdyaev's philosophy, which appeared to him to lack courage, bowing too easily to compromise, and always ready, so to speak, to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds: by safeguarding both the rights of man and the necessary truths, one never made a stand for either side. Perhaps because of that very ambiguity which, to his mind, was present in Berdyaev's thinking, Shestov's tone, with reference to his friend, often appeared even harsher than the tone he used in referring to those he knew should really have been his true adversaries -- Hegel or Spinoza, for example, or Solovyov, among his fellow Russian thinkers. Berdyaev never spoke with similar harshness of Shestov, and, indeed, often referred to them both as being basically on the same side, even in the field of philosophy. In his works, Berdyaev also cited Shestov in a positive and constructive manner more often than he did in a negative manner. Yet, at the same time, his

words convey how, in the end, he found Shestovian thought sterile and introversive, and not to be relied on. This picture of the situation shows clearly that the conditions for true dialogue between the two never existed, especially given Shestov's rough-hewn nature, always ripe for a fight and ready to argue his point, and more prone to monologue, as Berdyaev said, than to confrontation.

Here ends the speculative relation between the two philosophers, but there remains an important personal and historical postscript which must not be omitted. Shestov died shortly before the start of the Second World War, while Berdyaev died ten years later. It was that last decade, the worst of his life, which most deeply marked the philosopher. This was the beginning of a period of indigence and stress for him, with all the difficulties consequent on being a Russian exile in wartime France. In his autobiography, he evoked his isolation from even his fellow emigrant countrymen, with whom he had once shared so much from a cultural and professional, or personal point of view. In some cases, Berdyaev spoke of a simple cooling of relations, in others of outright betrayal, naming, among others, Merezhkovsky, Peter Struve, Anton Kartashov, Boris Zaitsev, Peter Muratov and Sergey Bulgakov. Indeed, it is in this regard that Berdyaev, on more than one occasion, brought to mind the person who, unlike the others, was always close to him and remained his greatest friend: "The only exception is Lev Shestov, with whom my friendship has grown stronger and deeper since the Kiev and Moscow days, and he is the only person with whom I could speak about matters that are of the greatest importance to us both." [52] While this is, of course, a personal note, written in the margins of his life story, and which has little to do with the two philosophers' works or their thinking, yet more than just bearing witness to the true lifelong friendship which united them, it also gives a clear indication of an important point -- the true link between their theories which united Berdyaev and Shestov: the philosophy of man, in the wake of Kierkegaard (whom both considered a master), the declension of thought "in the first person, singular," or, more specifically, the fundamental liberty of mankind in the face of God and of life. Between "Dream and Reality" (to use the alternative title which Berdyaev had wished to use for his autobiography), between the invisible and the visible, was not Wisdom (Sophia) as defined by Sergey Bulgakov, but man, the individual, in the tragic solitude which arose from his experience of freedom. This was what Berdyaev and Shestov both believed, and what they acted upon all their lives.

1. Nicolay Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality. An Essay in Autobiography*, English trans. by Katharine Lampert, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950, pp. 125-126.
2. Some of these letters were published in the magazine *Mosty*, No. 8, 1961.
3. Nathalie Baranoff-Chestov, *Vie de Léon Chestov, I: L'homme du souterrain, 1866-1929*, vol. I, Paris: La Différence, 1991, pp. 322-323 (quoting N.A. Berdyaev, Private letters to Shestov, Berlin, late 1923). Berdyaev continued: "In the end, only one thing exists which is worth concerning oneself with in life, and that is seeking the *exit*, and movement exists only in the person who finds this. And you, and Shloezer, and all the people like you, rise up against those who attribute a positive meaning to life. But attributing a positive meaning to life is, precisely, the defining characteristic of every religion." (Ibid. p. 323).
4. N. Baranoff, *op. cit.*, p. 324 (quoting L. Shestov, Private letter to Berdjaev, Paris, March 1924).
5. On this subject, Pierre Pascal wrote: "The pleasure, for the average listener, was in the

- confrontations between Berdyaev and Shestov. Something was lacking when Shestov wasn't there ..." (N. Baranoff, op. cit., p. 334, quoting P. Pascal, *Berdjaev-L'homme*, pp. 17-18).
6. N.A. Berdyaev, *Tragedya i obydennost'*, in *Voprosy zhizni*, March 1905.
 7. L. Shestov, "Pochvala gluposti. Po povodu knigi Nikolaya Berdyaeva *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*," in *Fakely*, No. 2, 1907, pp. 137-162 (and in L. Chestov, *Les commencements et les fins*, translated by Boris de Schloezer and Sylvie Luneau, Lausanne, Ed. L'Age d'Homme, 1987).
 8. L. Chestov, *Les commencements et les fins*, op. cit., p. 55.
 9. Ibid.
 10. "Audacity" (*derznovenie*) may be considered, so to speak, as a technical term in the thinking of Shestov, recurring almost everywhere in his work, in contrast to *pokornost'*, "submissiveness."
 11. L. Chestov, *Les commencements et les fins*, op. cit., p. 60.
 12. Ibid., p. 61.
 13. Ibid., p. 60.
 14. Ibid., p. 63.
 15. Ibid., p. 64.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Ibid.
 18. Ibid., p. 66.
 19. Ibid., pp. 67-68.
 20. Ibid., p. 68.
 21. Ibid.
 22. Ibid., p. 69.
 23. L. Chestov, "Nicolas Berdiaeff. La gnose et la philosophie existentielle", in the *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger*, volume 138, 1948, p. 3. The same article was subsequently included in Shestov's book *Speculation and Revelation* (L. Chestov, *Speculation et Révélation*, French trans. B. de Schloezer and Sylvie Luneau, Lausanne, L'Age d'homme, 1980).
 24. Ibid., p. 6.
 25. Ibid., p. 8.
 26. Ibid., p. 12.
 27. Ibid., p. 27.
 28. Ibidem.
 29. N.A. Berdjaev, "Po povodu 70-letnego yubileya Shestogo", in *Put'*, No. 50, 1936.
 30. Ibid., p. 50.
 31. Ibid.
 32. Ibid., p. 51.
 33. N.A. Berdjaev, "Lev Shestov and Kierkegaard," in *Sovremennye zapiski*, 1936, No. 62, p. 376.

34. Ibid., p. 377.
35. Ibid., p. 382.
36. Ibid.
37. N.A. Berdyaev, "Osnovnaya ideya filosofi Lva Shestova", in *Put'*, No. 58, 1938.
38. Ibid., p. 44.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., p. 45.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., p. 46.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., p. 47.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., p. 48.
49. L.I. Shestov, *Umozrenie i otkrovenie. Religioznaya filosofya Vladimira Solovyova i drugie stat'i*, Paris, YMCA-Press, 1964.
50. N.A. Berdjaev, *L'idea russa. I problemi fondamentali del pensiero russo (XIX e inizio XX secolo)*, Italian trans. by Cinzia De Lotto, Milan: Mursia, 1992, p. 231.
51. N.A. Berdyaev, "Po povodu 70-letnego yubileya Shestogo", in *Put'*, No. 50, 1936, p. 52.
52. Nikolai Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality. An Essay in Autobiography*, op. cit., p. 279.4

English translation: Karen Turnbull