

Lev Shestov's Philosophy of Voluntarism in a Contemporary Context of Athens vs. Jerusalem¹

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In his widely consulted *History of Russian Philosophy*,² the esteemed Russian philosopher Nicholas O. Lossky (1870–1965) treats Lev Shestov (1866–1938) under the heading “Shestov’s Irrationalism,” and affords him only a brief treatment, indicating his overall rejection of Shestov’s philosophical outlook. In straightforward fashion he renders his judgment:

Extreme skepticism manifested by Shestov in his work from the first has its source in the ideal of unrealizable superlogical absolute knowledge. In the book *Apotheosis of Groundlessness* Shestov disproves mutually contradictory scientific and philosophical theories, leaving the reader suspended in the void. In the book *Athens and Jerusalem* he contrasts rational thought dating back to the Greek philosophy with the superrational biblical apprehension of the world which denies the law of contradiction. The idea of God’s omnipotence leads Shestov to affirm, like the medieval philosopher Peter Damian, that God can make the past to have ne-

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² N.O. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1972), 325–26.

ver been; e.g., it is in His power to ordain that Socrates did not drink the cup of poison in the year 399 B.C.³

But Lossky is not alone in his basically negative assessment of the Shestovian corpus. Indeed, even though Shestov writes as a Russian philosopher, next to no one among his contemporary Russian colleagues takes notice of his thought, just as he himself, surprisingly, never dialogues with his philosopher-compatriots, like P.A. Florensky (1882–1937), N.A. Berdyaev (1874–1948), S.N. Bulgakov (1871–1944), S.L. Frank (1877–1950), L.P. Karsavin (1882–1952), and N.O. Lossky, except for two review articles on Berdyaev, the first appearing in his 1908 collection *Beginnings and Endings* (*Nachala i kontsy*) under the heading, “The Praise of Stupidity (Regarding the Book of Nicolas Berdyaev *Sub specie aeternitatis*),”⁴ and the second taking the form of a chapter in his posthumous collection *Umozrenie i otkrovenie*, entitled “Nicolas Berdiaev: Gnosis and Existential Philosophy” (Nikolai Berdiaev: Gnozis i èkzistentsial’naia filosofiiia).⁵ In both cases, as in Berdyaev’s own essays on Shestov, the two, as it were, sail by one another, as they spar over the validity of rational thought for existential meaning. Shestov stands firm in his point of view: “Human fates are decided on the scales of Job and not on the scales of speculation.”⁶ This lack of dialogue is baffling especially since Shestov, Berdyaev, and Bulgakov remained close friends from their university days in Kiev throughout their exile together in Paris. Apart from an early article published in 1905 entitled “Tragedy and Everydayness” (*Tragediia i obydennost’*) in which he criticizes Shestov’s psychological method as being too restrictive in not taking into account the valid contributions of rational philosophy,⁷ Ber-

³ Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 326.

⁴ Lev Shestov, “Pokhvala gluposti (Po povodu knigi Nikolaia Berdiaeva *Sub specie aeternitatis*),” in *Lev Shestov: Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh* [Lev Shestov: Works in two volumes] (Tomsk: Izdatel’stvo “Volodei,” 1996), 2:225–39.

⁵ Lev Shestov, *Umozrenie i otkrovenie* [Speculation and revelation] (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1964), 263–95.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁷ Shestov, *Sochineniia*, 1:464–91, especially 470.

dyaev, for his part, authored only two other studies on Shestov. One of these was a 1936 book review of the French translation of his book *Kierkegaard and Existential Philosophy*,⁸ in which Berdyaev complains that “the book is more about Shestov himself than about Kierkegaard,”⁹ furthermore lamenting that in his type of “existential” philosophy, “the idealization and apotheosis of life” that obtains is to the detriment of knowledge, leading him to ask: “Why is knowledge not life? Knowledge, too, is part of life; it is an event in being.”¹⁰ Berdyaev’s final, brief essay on Shestov, “The Fundamental Idea of Lev Shestov’s Philosophy,”¹¹ was occasioned by the latter’s death and endeavors to synthesize his thought around one main theme, namely Shestov’s overriding preoccupation with God, an active relation with whom, he maintained, was impeded by man’s subjugation to the power of necessity, necessity (Greek philosophy) itself being the fruit of the “tree of knowledge” in opposition to the “tree of life,” which flowers in Biblical revelation (Shestov thereby giving his interpretation of the biblical account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden). Berdyaev, for his part, obviously not sharing Shestov’s point of view and bemoaning his inner contradiction, writes that “although he was a philosopher, i.e., a man of thought and knowledge, he knew the tragedy of human existence and rejected knowledge.”¹²

Not unlike Berdyaev, Bulgakov forthrightly states that although he could not but admire Shestov as a friend and as a thinker, he was not able to accept his worldview. Like Berdyaev, he was also asked to share his thoughts on Shestov after

⁸ The Russian original came out posthumously in 1939; an English translation also exists: Lev Shestov, *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*, trans. Elinor Hewitt (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1970).

⁹ Berdyaev’s review, “Lev Shestov and Kierkegaard,” may be found in a collection of his works: Nikolai Berdiaev, *Tipy religioznoi mysli v Rossii* [Types of religious thought in Russia] (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1989): 398–404 (399 for the present quote). An English translation of the same may be found in Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Brightest Lights of the Silver Age: Essays on Russian Religious Thinkers*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Kettering, OH: Semantron Press, 2015), 133–40 (133 for the present quote).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 405; Jakim trans., 139.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 407–12; Jakim trans., 127–32.

¹² *Ibid.*, 411; Jakim trans., 131.