

PIOTR MRZYGLÓD, *Między 'metafizyką absurdu' a 'absurdem metafizyki.'* *Projekt dekonstrukcji metafizyki klasycznej w egzystencjalnej myśli Lwa Szestowa* (Wrocław: Papieski Wydział Teologiczny, 2014), pp. 354.

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Rev Piotr Mrzygłód's monograph fits in well with a multifaceted debate about the condition of contemporary intellectual culture, which – especially in the last decades – has turned to questioning the role of the intellect with its cognitive function, which thereby resulted in depreciation of classical metaphysics with its rationalistic attitude. The tendency has been accompanied by two increasing phenomena: faith in the progress that absolutises scientific and technological civilisation and a demand for the so-called “weak intellect” as any rationality has given way to 20th-century ideologies. The past experiences have shown that attempts to create a wholesome (i.e. formally and methodologically homogeneous) vision of reality have fallen through. It turned out that this picture with its ambiguity and pleochroism eludes any “privileged” approach. Moreover, naïve faith in science and intellect, defined by E. Husserl as “mistaken rationality,” together with fashionable prejudice and the ideological phraseology that it triggers, have both led to Europe's greatest crisis of culture in history.

In light of the above features we should no doubt read Lew Shestov's philosophical project as nothing less than an expression of an uncompromising revolt against the attitudes of turning a blind eye to what has been lost in European thought and how its loftiness has been reduced. Shestov's unbridled desire to wake the *Homo sapiens*, who has indulged in reflecting on drivel, and even more so, his persistent and insensible pursuit for inciting an intellectual tumult in the awareness of the thinkers of that time, resulted in the fact that his philosophy started to be nicknamed “absurd.” The Russian philosopher's thought had come up against numerous difficulties connected with its expressivity and his inability to put into words what was most important and disturbing to him. This situation gave birth to a number of misunderstandings among the recipients. The negative form of expressing thoughts, twists of events and increasing number of paradoxes (often ending up with nonsense) all were to help him to “expose the enemy.”

All of the above still cannot nullify the question: Are we, rich with tragic experiences of the previous century, yet overwhelmed with the demands of the present, able to discern and detect the deepest aspect of Shestov's reflection, which to him was a matter of life and death? N. Berdyaev, a friend of his, wrote: “He was perturbed by the power of necessity over human life, the power that engenders atrocities of life. He was not interested in brutal and vulgar forms of necessity, but its refined countenances” [*Fundamentalna idea filozofii Lwa Szestowa*]. It was precisely in the minuteness of existence, human tragedy, atrocity, hopelessness and despair that he wanted to track down the path to the meaning of all being, a kind of “metaphysics” of the possible and impossible. He was not engaged in academic disputes and debates, which are dominated by what is universally binding, or by a necessity born of rational cognition. Driven by the principle of independence of thought, despite the fashion and tendencies of the age, he would sooner choose human existence than objectivity of the process of cognition. The nature of this attitude was expressed well by Jan Patočka: “Nowadays we often get to see people who meet to talk about abstract or lofty topics, which raise the spirit and mind, or at least that is what we hope for, and if only for a moment dispel the anxiety we all share somehow. This is beautiful and beneficial, but the level of these discussions most frequently resembles a chat of old wives. The meaning of philosophical reflection lies elsewhere. Philosophical reflection ought to help us overcome our worries, ought to be a kind of spiritual activity in the situation we face” [“Sytuacja człowieka – sytuacja Europy,” *Znak*, no. 2-3 (351-352): 181]. Let us ask then: Does Shestov's thought not

express this very concern about the “worried” man? Perhaps. That is why we owe respect to Rev Piotr Mrzygłód for the fact that he wished to devote a few years of his meticulous work to this extraordinarily inspiring way of philosophising Shestov cultivated. Reading his book leads to a just conviction that the truth and cognition (knowledge) are separate problems (p. 70). Each responsible thinker is faced with a dilemma: whether to accept the fact that a take on reality is always relative and dependent (socially, culturally, historically, etc.) and as such undergoes a continual interpretation and criticism of its previous judgements and assumptions (mind, this way does not have to be random and relative when it comes to the results it achieves) or to put one’s thought on the track of a methodologically infallible cognitive process. As the author points out, the Russian philosopher, drawing inspiration from the Book of *Genesis* proves that the truth is found in God, and cognition and knowledge are the fields of a deceptive, erroneous and malicious activity, which drives us away from the truth and nullifies it. Indeed, the truth is never a product or “effect” of a methodologically reliable process of intellectual cognition, because it is ever greater than the intellect, which it gives itself to as a gift.

Making use of Biblical premises so willingly, Shestov defends the vastness of the intellect with its cognitive role. The philosopher unfolds his view disguised as an objection to the apotheosis of rationalism, based on his own interpretations of the sin of the forefathers. According to it, it is not as much lack of obedience to God, but lack of trust for God’s truth: “So, if God had told the truth, sin and death would stem from knowledge, but if the ‘Serpent’ told Eve the truth, the knowledge would make humanity and gods equal” (p. 70). We need to add that there would be no contradiction between Shestov and the Magisterium in the interpretation of original sin, if we understood the pursuit of knowledge as a pursuit led by human pride. It does not surprise us then that the philosopher, wishing to incorporate faith into the intellect, designs a “new dimension of thinking” (p. 85), which is far from fruitless intellectualising, but instead constitutes liberation and salvation. A “new” philosophy in Shestov’s version does not need reasons, proofs or arguments that the “old” one, striving for its own infallibility and objectivism, required. In the latter, everything seemed obvious and certain, because it was based on unchangeable laws of being and cognition principles. On the other hand, in Shestov’s version everything is guided by a law of uncertainty, risk and randomness. The “old” philosophy was based on truths and necessities, the “new” one on the unfettered freedom of the spirit. According to Shestov, the “first philosophy” is “utter despair,” which gives source access to the truth of being. Its philosophical *arché* was *biespoczwiennost* – absolute lack of roots, homelessness, alienation and thereby an “apotheosis of ambiguity.” The truth, just like God, is not unveiled in what is directly revealed, but in what is hidden, inaccessible and mysterious (p. 78).

The reviewed book consists of two parts, the first of which presents historical and methodological assumptions of Shestov’s philosophy (p. 27-90). The second one, decidedly longer, as it serves as a basic framework of the reflection, attempts to discuss the triad God-man-the world critically (p. 91-313). Such a structure is accounted for by conceptual needs, which is mentioned and proved by the author several times.

In Part 1, Rev Mrzygłód wished to provide the reader with a proper key (conceptual foundation, dialectic thinking, the principle of “ambiguity”) to understanding the second, essential part of the book. That is why he first discussed Shestov’s “historical lineage”, his deconstruction of classical metaphysics, as well his “plan of a new philosophy” (“biblical” and “religious”). The Russian philosopher also puts forward a existentially-inclined philosophy, which questions axioms, necessities and any “obviousness.” Therefore, it draws from the thought of Luther, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Kant, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, etc. Being away from academic centres, in a space of intellectual “freedom,” he builds his own vision of reality, based on antinomies, at times so far-reaching that it is hard to accept them, e.g. with regard to Judeo-Christian Revelation or Greek philosophy.

In Part 2, comprising 3 chapters, the author discusses the triad God-man-the world, which is

the foundation of, as he points out, Shestov's meticulously constructed metaphysics (p. 91-313). However, a question arises here: Does Shestov really mean metaphysics, or perhaps a critical evaluation of rationality that man is contaminated with? Among Shestov's writings, we can hardly find any that would explicitly tackle the problem of metaphysics or understanding of being as a being. It is certain, nonetheless, that the mentioned triad God-man-the world shows versions (dimensions) of being.

As the author proves, for Shestov God is ultimately nameless, natureless and essenceless. His existence cannot be deduced from any logical series of arguments or theodiceal premises. Shestov defends at any cost the transcendence and autonomy of God in the sphere of His will and cognition from the idolatry of the human intellect. He opines that Nietzsche's statement that "God is dead" was based on the imbalance in speaking about God; in fact, what was put to death were images and a former language used to talk about Him, and not His existence. In His essence, God is absolute freedom, therefore He is pure potentiality in doing anything. Shestov firmly stresses the personal character of the Divine being (will, intellect, activity, morality). There is no way of tracking down God's essence by means of logical sequence, because the truth about Him lies in what is accidental, individual, unique and miraculously revealed. Hence, according to the Russian philosopher, any kind of theodicea, or talking about God's providential plan, is pointless. God's nature is meted out by "ambiguity," which can be apprehended by means of a "blessed ignorance," despair, sadness and fright, which rely trustingly on God (p. 93-144).

The other, perhaps most important, of Shestov's interests is man. He is an incarnate "anti-nomy," first of all, before himself, and then before the world and God. What links God to man is the "lack of roots," at the foundation of which lies freedom. That is why God does not demand anything of man; He does not constrain him, but strengthens the moment of his freedom toward the impossible. Man is similar to God also in that the structure of his substantial being cannot be strictly defined. His will in turn has a creative power of changing human nature. Obviously, this striving, in Shestov's opinion, does not entail the temptation of becoming a human god, but the openness to the light of Christ God-Man (p. 145-246).

The final element of the metaphysic triad is the world. For the Russian thinker, the world is a reality that is characterised by irrational spontaneity of internal processes. It comes from "nothingness" as the "original source of its being." Ultimately, it is God who is the "Nothingness" that eternally fills the chasm of non-being. Shestov's reality thus defines chaos (disorder) as the primary form of existence. It is the primary source and unbridled element of eternal freedom. The author rightly concludes that the idea of chaos is always closer to a philosopher than the idea of cosmos. A free and unfettered creation of being signifies a blessing, because it justifies everything and everyone in the world. In this way, Shestov's chaos is the canvas of the whole reality; it guarantees the spontaneity of being, its freedom and vitality, as well as the free intervention of God in the world. The frequently recalled "lack of roots" in fact uncovers natural and physical "groundlessness" of the created reality as a sign of God's presence in the world.

Finally, we come across Shestov's concept of the history of the world, which denotes a slow process of unveiling intrinsic and indescribable despair and tragedy. This is the story of "self-assertion" and "adaptation" of genera, and an incessant struggle with necessities. Hence, the lookout for any ordering mechanisms is redundant, or even fatal. According to Shestov, it is absurd to talk about "the meaning of history" or a superior idea that orders its course. The world of Shestov does not unfold to a plan, but is created "on the go." Therefore, as we have mentioned, what elucidates the history of the world is human despair with its two meanings: as a realisation of one's one individuality, and "universality" and "ahistoricity." Owing to this, the history of the world has its "meaning." Eventually, the all-embracing nonsensicality and unpredictability of all sections of being, and thereby the lack of hope, are deemed "salvific" by Shestov (p. 247-322).

Mrzygłód's book is enthralling thanks to its scale, erudition and multifacetedness. The exposition of a difficult to grasp irrationalistic thought of Shestov requires an exquisite ability to synthesise, preceded by an analysis that turns into a dynamic and factual interpretative process. The entire reasoning is exceptionally lively and in the course of narration we might take a glimpse of the author's intellectual temper. He moves with ease among the entangled issues of philosophy and theology. It is accompanied by the clarity and coherence of argumentation. The author proves to be "in command" of the text. These are the unquestionable assets of the publication. Moreover, Rev Mrzygłód has shown extraordinary diligence as far as the source in their diversified form and expression are concerned, as well as great self-reliance while forming conclusions, even though they are slightly on the short side. It becomes apparent on the level of subtlety and perspicacity of the analyses, which to a great degree are based on the opinions (even the major part of the bibliography is taken up by "commentaries" on Shestov) borrowed from the "experts" on Shestov's philosophy (C. Wodziński, A. Sawicki). There is a scarcity of original and critical analyses of the source texts. It might have been of use to show new clues about interpreting Shestov that distance themselves from universally accepted opinions. Notwithstanding, safe references to renowned academic specialists are fully understandable, because the thought under scrutiny is difficult to examine and demands preliminary framework.

The book is a proof that the evaluation of Shestov's thought is made from a strictly determined point of view, for Mrzygłód constitutes metaphysical criteria of correct thinking in order to move on to indicate that the reality under analysis does not live up to them and does not deserve to be debated on. I believe that we should have in mind that the humanities have this advantage over sciences that even "unjust" claims may there serve as encouragement to a reasonable dispute. Does the service of thinking not consist in humbly and patiently listening to what it has to say in order to correct judgements, and then ask again? The author's approach is slightly misleading, because it places thoughts in an unknown interpretative dimension that puts an end to its proper reading, and even more so, to applying it to modern times. It was expressed perfectly well by S. Mazurek, whom the author quotes: "... Shestov's thought, filled with revolts against all that is rational, was born of a 'dispute' over man as well as persistent striving for understanding the fallen human being in the post-utopian era. Therefore, this philosophy cannot be examined only in the category of a historical phenomenon, because the post-utopian period is underway, and we are part of it" (p.21-22). It all shows that the interpretation of Shestov's thought in light of the criterion of intellectual correctness is dubious if it does not take into account, above all, a broad context that S. Mazurek talks about, precisely as a still valid problem of man. Hence, if Shestov's thinking derived from "the inside of a religious metaphor," should Mrzygłód's thinking not be "from inside of Shestov"?

On the whole, Rev Piotr Mrzygłód's book is creative, original and contributes a lot to reception of Russian philosophy, which is relatively unknown in Poland. It links existential philosophy, anthropology and theology with realistic classical thought in an interesting way. The study is erudite and tackles extensive scope of problems: from methodological and epistemological assumptions, to analyses of the Divine and human being, to the structures of the world and history. It would surely be even more valuable if it were more perspicuous and subtle in reasoning.

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