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## Shestov and Hegel: The Experience of Truth

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**Abstract.** L. Shestov and G.W.F. Hegel were concerned with the problem of truth and knowledge. The genuine dialectical relationship between necessity and freedom, according to Hegel, is expressed in the return of the absolute to itself as a realized unity of itself and *its own other*. As a result, the hidden power of absolute truth erodes the limitations of particular definitions, forcing one to pass over into another and return to itself in a new, truer form. While Hegel thought of the history of philosophy as a series of necessary stages in the advancement of truth and knowledge, Shestov was sceptical of the claims about the necessity and possibility of absolute knowledge. The purpose of our research is to demonstrate the specific features of the philosophical interpretation of Hegel's ideas in the works of religious existentialist Shestov, as well as to generalize Shestov's understanding of the principles of correlating the categories of faith and reason when dealing with the problem of truth through the interpretation of Hegel's philosophy. This approach seems acceptable, since the two thinkers differ significantly in their understanding of the process of searching for truth, which found expression in their views on the very course of the historical-philosophical process. Shestov believed that a study of the history of philosophy allows us to grow and develop through a free and committed attitude towards truth and knowledge. For him, such a commitment is a criterion by which we can judge whether we have a genuine experience of knowing the truth. For Hegel, our experience in pursuing the truth is not a product of the history of philosophy, but a process underlying the history of philosophy. Therefore, the experience of truth, a self-reflection on the contradictions, is an experience of a continuous process of moving away from the familiar towards something new, where knowledge appears as an endless process of liberating thought from the burden of non-existence, a revival of the miracle of thinking as the creation of the impossible.

**Keywords:** *history of philosophy, Hegel, Shestov, epistemology, metaphysics, experience of truth*

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Научная статья

## Шестов и Гегель: опыт познания истины

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**Аннотация.** Л.И. Шестов и Г.В.Ф. Гегель стремились к исследованию проблемы познания истины. Подлинная диалектическая взаимосвязь необходимости и свободы, по мысли Гегеля, получает выражение в возвращении к себе абсолютного как осуществленного единства себя и своего другого, благодаря чему скрытая сила абсолютной истины расторгает ограниченность частных определений, заставляя переходить одно в другое и возвращаться к себе в новой, более истинной форме. Если Гегель считал историю философии единым процессом саморазвития абсолютной идеи, где различия представляют собой ступени познания истины, то Шестов скептически относился к утверждениям о необходимости и возможности абсолютного, истинного знания. Цель настоящего исследования – показать особенности философской интерпретации идей Г.В.Ф. Гегеля, реализованные в творчестве религиозного экзистенциалиста Л.И. Шестова, обобщить понимание Шестовым принципов соотношения категорий веры и разума в постижении проблемы истины через интерпретацию философии Гегеля. Данный подход кажется вполне приемлемым, поскольку у этих мыслителей крайне разное понимание процесса познания истины, что выразилось в их представлении самого хода историко-философского процесса. Шестов верил, что изучение истории философии дает возможность расти и развиваться благодаря свободному и преданному отношению к истине и знанию. Для него такая приверженность выступает критерием, по которому мы можем судить о том, что у нас есть подлинный опыт познания истины. Но для Гегеля то, что мы переживаем, когда постигаем истину, является не продуктом истории философии, а процессом, лежащим в основе истории философии. Следовательно, переживание истины, саморефлексия над противоречиями – это переживание непрерывного процесса отхода от привычного к осознанию чего-то нового, где знание предстает нескончаемым процессом освобождения мысли от бремени небытия, возрождением чуда мышления как творчества невозможного.

**Ключевые слова:** история философии, Г.В.Ф. Гегель, Л. Шестов, эпистемология, метафизика, познание истины

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### Introduction: Truth as Experience Through the History of Philosophy

Lev Shestov (1866–1938) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) are two philosophers to have engaged with the problem of knowledge. Shestov in his *Theory of Knowledge* considers the history of philosophy to be a discipline in its own right, noting Kant's tendency to view it primarily as a series of false starts. Whereas for Hegel, progress is made in the history of philosophy; philosophers, rather than leading us towards dead ends, make advancements in the problems they are dealing with, if only in small steps, providing at least temporary solutions that can then give rise to more adequate ones. Thus, the inquiry moves forward schematically, in a continuous dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. S. Gutova emphasizes, "Hegel makes no secret of an obvious borrowing from Plotinus and even admires his significant contribution to the development of philosophy. The German thinker sees Neoplatonism as one of the key stages in the formation of the Absolute Idea, since it is in this ancient school that the 'rational concept' acquires its fundamentally new qualitative expression"<sup>1</sup> [1, p. 120]. As a deeply religious thinker, a "knight of faith", Shestov recognizes in Hegel's objective idealism an important reading of Christianity, which is based on the consistent development of ancient thought. However, the claim of philosophical reason to create a logical system describing the formation of the world as a self-development of the Absolute (the One) and as a unity of historical process in Hegel's philosophy is not acceptable for Shestov's philosophy [2, pp. 165–166].

Shestov discards this understanding of the history of philosophy and this way of comprehending the truth. He suggests being open in the process of searching for the truth, especially in rethinking the history of philosophy, since it is in this process that truth can be lived and experienced by us; this furnishes us with an opportunity to grow and develop in our relation to the truth through both our freedom and our commitment towards it. In one of his most important books, *Athens and Jerusalem*,

Shestov provides a kind of a classification of his philosophy. He begins with a critique of philosophical rational and scientific thought: "In pursuing knowledge, the great philosophers lost the most precious of the Creator's gifts – freedom; Parmenides was not a free man but one enchained" [3, pp. 16–17].

The loss of the ability to think freely leads to the realization that knowledge-oriented philosophy inevitably generates the horror of being: "Metaphysics, he remarked in 'The Theory of Knowledge' (1916), 'was not only unable to find a form of expression for her truths which would free her from the obligation of proof; she did not even want to'. Shestov condemned metaphysics, which he considered merely the obverse of positivistic thought, for its scientific pretensions and its refusal to confront the horror of being" [4, p. 31]. Therefore, in knowledge we have that freedom where the truth evinces itself in the very nature of philosophy that cannot be imposed upon us.

#### Shestovian Experience of Truth

For Shestov, truth is so much more than a property of propositions, nor is it merely a matter of what is real or unreal, nor is it something confined to a reasoning mind. According to him, philosophical thinking "is a painful questioning on the border of being about the ontological foundations 'before' and 'beyond' knowledge and objectification... Philosophy is a metaphysics that opposes the rational mode of thinking. It does not seek to explain the world, but 'looks back' at it, legitimizes it as free and accessible only to the unique human personality" [5, p. 28]. Shestov opposes his theory of knowledge to the rationalist conceptions of truth, thereby initiating an epistemological shift away from the focus of modern philosophy on the question of what constitutes knowledge, that is to say, away from the modern endeavour to place philosophy upon a solid footing and to explain how it can resemble a science and yet not be a science. It is no coincidence that most researchers define Shestov's philosophy as a "metaphysics of groundlessness", an intense search for the "hidden", "unmanifested", "potential": "Chivalrous (in the spirit of Nietzsche) or insightfully sacred (in the spirit of Shakespeare and

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<sup>1</sup>Hereinafter, the citations from Russian sources were translated by the authors of this article.

Kierkegaard) overcoming of a philosophical ailment is associated with sincere and audacious doubt. And it is possible to achieve productive doubt of true thought by giving up the ground” [6, p. 88].

Shestov believes that human existence has never been based on the principles of reason. Reason is hostile to life; humans are irrational beings by their very nature, since human nature is contradictory and antonymic *a priori*. Moreover, the entire human culture and history is mystical. In this regard, the problem of truth in Shestov’s philosophy can be considered in the context of mind and reason. The mind strives for a utilitarian attitude towards truth and its use, while reason “participates” in truth as truly existing [7, p. 110].

Shestov writes about the truth taken in an existential context. He presents us with a criterion by which we can determine for our own selves the value of truth, what truth is, and what the experience of truth is like: “And yet one desires to know whether he does indeed possess the truth or whether he has only a universal error in his hands. What is to be done? I think there is a way. He should think to himself that it is absolutely impossible for his truth to be binding upon anybody. If in spite of this he still refuses to renounce her, if the truth can suffer such an ordeal and yet remain the same to him as she was before, then it may be supposed that she is worth something” [8, p. 156]. Thus, Shestov firmly rejects the important attributes of truth: universality and necessity. In Shestov’s philosophical search for truth, “everything is equally possible and impossible” [9, p. 38].

However, although the experience of truth is personal, it does not follow that truth itself is subjective and relative, or that anything goes. “Philosophy focuses on the unrepeatable, the amazing, the accidental and the singular. Philosophy asks about the ultimate and the groundless, it has no judge and no legislator, it is itself the legislator of all other forms of culture and self-awareness” [5, p. 34]. Relativism towards truth is a mere ploy for masking the insecurity that underlies the ability to accuse one another of lying. “Shestov considers this mistake as a series of unsuccessful attempts to reconcile

the revealed truth of the Bible with the Hellenistic truth. And all this leads to a great uprising in philosophy against reason and knowledge: ‘Philosophy is not a curious looking around, not *Besinnung*, but a great struggle’, whose task is ‘to throw off the power of the soulless and entirely indifferent truths into which the fruits of the tree of knowledge have been transformed’” [6, p. 86].

Shestov is looking for ways to the truth through connection with the absolute, in a feat of faith. He believes some extra exertion is required in order to avoid the temptation of treating knowledge as a fixed and passive object: “Conceptual thinking dries up the world, makes it ‘convenient’, ‘practical’, ultimately making the person himself a means, depriving him of agency” [5, pp. 33–34]. According to Shestov, philosophy is “sceptical and unsystematic and thus resonates strongly with people” [5, p. 34].

Having taken possession of knowledge, we must then be able to distinguish the experience of truth from the experience of a facsimile of truth, that which condenses intricate notions. This points to the overcoming of Hegelian rationalism in Shestov’s philosophy through the interpretation of Hegel’s early works in an irrational way: “Shestov makes his criticism of Hegel according to the traditional principle: in the German philosopher he sees the completion of the destructive new European rationalism, the final victory of ‘philosophy’ over faith” [5, p. 36]. It was this initial recognition of the irrationality of human existence itself that made Shestov reconsider his attitude towards the past philosophical heritage. He emphasizes in his works that, being scientific, traditional European thought, from Socrates to Hegel, ignored man. Philosophers developed values unrelated to the actual life of people. According to Shestov, human life is a colossal tragedy: “the tragedy of old Lear, deceived by his daughters, the tragedy of Hamlet, Anna Karenina, Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich and Dostoyevsky’s the Underground Man, the tragedy of human loneliness” [10, p. 20]. By what means can the unfamiliar develop out of the familiar, and how can we recognize, or experience, truth that is authentically new and not merely old truth re-modelled?

### **Hegelian Experience of Truth**

Whether we experience a mere facsimile of truth or truth itself, the issue arises as to whether it is a product that is experienced or a process; that is to say, the experience of true philosophical revelations or the experience of philosophizing in a truthful manner, so to speak: “Science sets forth this formative process in all its detail and necessity, exposing the mature configuration of everything which has already been reduced to a moment and property of Spirit. The goal is Spirit’s insight into what knowing is” [11, p. 17]. It is important to remember that what Hegel terms Spirit, the mature configuration of which is to be laid bare, is Mind; not merely my mind or your mind, but the Mind of humanity. The Mind of God, which we will discover at the end of the process, once everything has worked itself out and Spirit comes to know itself through human history. An experience of truth and knowledge requires that a person, unhurriedly and without distractions, goes through a particular stage of acquiring truth and knowledge, wherein this experience has its own particular shape and structure that are incomplete and yet fully realized for that stage.

The history of philosophy does not merely bestow upon us products to be appropriated or processes to be instituted and through which we may arrive at our present condition with regard to truth and knowledge. This is a path that has to be endured, the length of which is the entire development throughout history of the stages of consciousness; and it is the individual who wants to experience truth and knowledge that has to endure this path. Truth and knowledge are then not so much products as a process which can be accessed through its products and which we are active participants in, both mentally and spiritually. Thus, the experience of truth and knowledge for Hegel, and for Shestov as well, requires commitment: “Since the Substance of the individual, the World-Spirit itself, has had the patience to pass through these shapes over the long passage of time, and to take upon itself the enormous labour of world-history, in which it embodied in each shape as much of its entire content as that shape was capable of holding, and

since it could not have attained consciousness of itself by any lesser effort, the individual certainly cannot by the nature of the case comprehend his own substance more easily” [11, p. 17].

The World-Spirit, or Mind, thus works itself out through the oppositions of its moments in history, endeavouring to arrive at a more complete understanding of what it is, which is to say, what it is to be fully human. And there is progress, for each new moment of the World-Spirit is more complex and developed than the one that preceded it, more and more does the World-Spirit become manifest in relation to its past. And at a number of different moments along the path, humanity becomes conscious of itself as involved in this process, if only in the form of a tragic awareness of its condition, which has much of the appearance of necessity and yet is open to many and diverse possibilities. Hegel provides the essential components on how each stage leads to the next, but the richness of the experience of truth and knowledge rests, to a large extent, on the individual’s own development of his or her historical and cultural literacy.

### **The Experience of Truth and the Dismantling of the Familiar**

Verification in philosophy plays itself out in an attempt to avoid contradictions, but if Schopenhauer, or Hegel, are able to formulate a big idea that is appropriate for their time and that the people of the age can identify with, their contradictions can be overlooked: “...strictly speaking, we must confess that we have no real objective method of verifying a philosophical truth, and when we criticize other people’s systems, we judge arbitrarily after all” [8, p. 156]. Shestov recommends his test or criterion of truth whereby we imagine that the truth that we have is not binding upon anybody else; if we then do not wish to keep it, we should reconsider it. With Hegel we have his system laid out in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the two *Logics*.

Hegel ontologizes logic, emphasizing that “this kingdom is the truth without veils, as it is in itself and for itself. Therefore, one can say that its content is the image of G-d, such as it is in its eternal essence before the creation of the world and of a finite spirit” [3, p. 56]. Hegel’s God is the essence of the idea, the absolute, the essence



achieved in thought and concept. It is in this understanding of the Hegelian God that Shestov sees the convergence of religion and philosophy, for both the object of religion and the object of philosophy is the eternal truth in objectivity, God and knowledge of God: "Thus religion and philosophy come to be one... It is in the peculiar way in which they both occupy themselves with God that the distinction comes out" [11, p. 20].

Shestov remains irreconcilable: "If you want to ruin a new idea – try to give it the widest possible publicity... The majority of philosophic systems are chaotically and obscurely expounded, so that not every educated person can understand them. It is a pity to kill one's own child, and every one does his best to save it from premature death" [8, p. 158]. For Hegel, despite the undoubted truth of its content, Christianity, by virtue of the general form of religious representation, was not an adequate expression of absolute truth, such an expression it finds only in philosophy. Hegel writes, "Thus the expression 'faith' is principally used to express the certainty that a God exists..." [12, p. 118]. Since God is self-knowledge, "...faith must be defined as the witness of the spirit to absolute Spirit, or as a certainty of the truth..." [12, p. 212]. Hegel seeks to give faith a form of mediation: "It itself is already this form implicitly, for it is knowledge of God and of His character, and this knowledge is in itself a process, a movement – is life, mediation" [12, p. 218]. In this sense, faith is knowledge: "We have knowledge of God, and, in fact, immediate knowledge" [12, p. 119]. Therefore, Hegel equates faith with knowledge, but separates the former from the process of cognition.

Yet, there is a problem here, of which, perhaps, Hegel may assist in the resolution. We can deceive ourselves, we can make an involuntary error, we can mistake a chimera for reality. Shestov believes it to be within our capacity to eliminate the possibility of genuine error and relate to the truth without arguments or judgements. Indeed, there are realms of discourse where it is taken for granted that proofs are impossible: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" [13, p. 151]. The experience of truth is in effect an experience of truths, ultimate truths; that is to say, pluralism replaces foundations and proofs. However, "the

fundamental difference is that the ultimate truths are absolutely unintelligible. Unintelligible, I repeat, but not inaccessible. It is true that middle truths also are, strictly speaking, unintelligible. Who will assert that he understands light, heat, pain, pride, joy, degradation?" [8, pp. 162–163].

Revelations of ultimate truths are more likely to be experienced by an understanding that is adequate to the reception of such truths, to the knowledge they disclose; understanding the truth does not merely inform the mind, it liberates it, making it responsive to new experiences. The experience of truth and knowledge, Hegel argues, is not a matter of owning the truth by making it familiar and then asserting its ideal representation, the kind of idealism Shestov referred to; it is quite the opposite, a continuous interplay between the understanding and the unfamiliar: "...existence has thus merely passed over into *figurative representation*. At the same time, it is thus something *familiar*, something which the existent Spirit is finished and done with, so that it is no longer active or really interested in it. Although the activity that has finished with existence is itself only the movement of the particular Spirit, the Spirit that does not comprehend itself, [genuine] knowing, on the other hand, is directed against the representation thus formed, against this [mere] familiarity; knowing is the activity of the *universal self*, the concern of *thinking*" [11, p. 18]. Thus, there are two ways of knowing: what we have learned through reason and what we have understood through faith, which means a deeper and more scrupulous way of understanding something, rather than a superficial acquaintance.

Shestov contrasts salvation with Hegel's "optimistic rationalism" and his conviction about the omnipotence of man as an opportunity to, "through unity with God", become oneself and find one's true self. Unlike Hegel, salvation for Shestov is an object of true faith, not a rational construction, not an intelligible project. According to Shestov, the phenomenon of faith directs man into a world where there is neither law nor reason, but only the riddle of faith, which proclaims that he will be saved beyond and outside of law, in Christ.

### Conclusion: The Experience of Truth as True Understanding

Shestov's commitment to the truth tempered with Hegel's self-reflectivity, without which truth will not be a genuine experience, allows Shestov to distinguish a genuine experience of truth from a mere facsimile, that is, to overcome the dependency on established opinions. It is no coincidence that some researchers called Shestov's thought "Ahasveric" [14, p. 522], and the thinker himself, a "wanderer" [15, p. 15]. Shestov emphasized that true universality can only be born out of homelessness. Thus, Shestov's thought was based on the life of an exile, a fugitive, in contrast to the established, logically structured metaphysics: in Nietzschean terms, the life of a wanderer. Shestov's philosophy is uncompromising in its assertion of homelessness, anxiety and even fear. Dangerous experiences are for Shestov the very precondition of authentic thought, since "a thinking man is one who has lost his balance, in the vulgar, not in the tragic sense" [9, p. 139].

To summarize, the philosophical experience of truth can overcome serious logical or empirical challenges; it can survive due to, and is indeed strengthened by, evidence that otherwise, from a logical point of view, would anticipate a weakening of beliefs. This survival, in the face of the destruction of the original evidence bases, can be explained by the make-up of the philosopher's knowing mind, the instrument of his or her understanding, that which enables him or her to cognize anything at all. By cultivating understanding, we render it adequate to the things to be known; knowing such things becomes possible. Thus, the experience of truth is a victory; understanding attains its genuine experience through a dismantling of the familiar and achieves victory by reflecting upon its own activity and contradictions. Indeed, the life of the mind is nourished by a continuous dismantling of the familiar to the extent that death itself, this ultimate dismantling, leaves understanding untouched, while enriching its experience of truth.

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