Three Elements in Shestov's and Fondane's Thought

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"Existentialist", "existential", "religious", "Jewish", "Russian", "Romanian": most if not all labels applied to Shestov and to his disciple Fondane contain some combination of those words. Labels which, however, do not tell us anything about the quality of their thought. "Tragic thinker" is apter and more descriptive, but only up to a point, as I hope to show.

I will begin with an old problem which some may consider theological rather than philosophical: How powerful is God? For Shestov and Fondane, God's purposes and actions are absolutely arbitrary and impervious to our rational scrutiny. More rationalistic Jews, men like Maimonides, Spinoza or Einstein, have taken a more moderate position: God's power is great indeed, yet limited by the rules of logic and the good order of the universe, so that, for example, God cannot contradict himself and make that something be simultaneously true and untrue. Rabbinic Judaism has followed the track that keeps the power of God within the bounds of logic, and such is also Aquinas' position[1], and therefore the orthodox doctrine of the Catholic Church. "God can take all corruption, mental and physical," says Aquinas, "from a woman who has lost her integrity, but he cannot remove the fact that once she did lose it."[2] At the other extreme are those who believe that far from being omnipotent, God is powerless without human cooperation: this sobering conclusion was reached by Hans Jonas in his old age[3], in view of the Shoa and the catastrophes which occurred during his life. A benevolent and omnipotent God could not have let those happen, Jonas believed.

Shestov died in Paris in 1938, and his disciple Fondane died in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944; both believed that God is able to do anything: contradict himself, make time run backwards, and even return to Job the children he had taken away from him – the same ones, not just the same number. That is the first of the basic elements in Shestov's and Fondane's philosophy. I will call it the Absolute Omnipotence element. While Rabbinic Judaism and the Catholic Church are averse to Absolute Omnipotence, Luther, on the other hand, explicitly affirmed the independence of God's actions from any logical limitation – "In vain does one fashion a logic of faith", and "No syllogistic form is valid when applied to divine forms."[4] That is a sample of Luther's doctrine about God's power in relation to logic, and that is one reason why Shestov held Luther in the highest regard.

A second basic element of Shestov's and Fondane's philosophy is Nominalism, a philosophic position regarding the medieval problem of universals, that is, the problem of the ontological status of general words such as "mankind." For the so-called realists,

"mankind" refers to something which has full existence – even more: super existence – in a realm of ideas, Plato's heaven of forms. On the opposite side, the nominalists are anti-Platonic; according to them the word "mankind" is nothing more than a wind from the mouth, a flatus voci, and the only things which can be said to exist truly are particulars: this piece of quartz, that rose, you, me. The 14th century philosopher William of Ockham (he of the famous razor) seems to have been the first fully fledged proponent of the nominalist doctrine. His teacher, Duns Scotus, was the first philosopher to be willing to fully uphold free will in spite of the theoretical difficulties attendant on the issue of God's power, particularly his power to know future contingencies. Both Scotus and Ockham were British, and their positive valuation of sense experience plus their antipathy to Plato's heaven of forms, runs, like the red thread in the Royal Navy's ropes, through much of subsequent British thought.

Now, those two elements, Absolute Omnipotence and Nominalism, reinforce each other. Not that one logically entails the other – definitely not – but getting rid of Plato's heaven of ideas, that crystalline regulative realm where all is eternal, intelligible and necessary, makes it easier to believe in an arbitrary and omnipotent God. And reciprocally, faith in a God who is not limited by the rules of logic dims the brilliance of any heaven of ideas.

The next notable development of the Nominalist element had to wait until after Newton's discoveries had raised man's trust on human reason to heights thereto unknown. Yet, according to Newton's Third Law, there is no action without a reaction, no force without another force directly opposed, and so it happened that the greatest triumph of reason elicited, in the 18th century, the sharpest skepticism. Bishop Berkeley assaulted the consistency of infinitesimal calculus, and, more decisively, David Hume, the champion of contingency, maintained that all connections or relations between our perceptions, including that of cause and effect, are only habits of our mind. That means that the natural sciences – and even geometry! – have, in Hume's view, the same epistemic status as, say, ethnography.

Let me digress for half-a-minute to mention a curious fact. In the mid-1730's Hume wrote his *Treatise of Human Nature* in the small town of La Flèche, in Anjou. Why, of all places, did the very young Hume choose La Flèche, where more than a century earlier Descartes had attended the Jesuits' school? Was it because he was aware that what he was trying to do was nothing less than demolish the rationalistic constructions of Plato, Aristotle and Descartes? Nobody seems to know.

After Hume, the center of power of the nominalistic element moved from the British isles to the Baltic coast, more precisely to Königsberg. I am not referring to Kant, but to his far less famous contemporary and compatriot Johann Georg Hamann. During a business trip to London in 1757, twenty-seven-year-old Hamann had an epiphany, after which he dedicated his life to combating the rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment. Did he meet Hume during that trip to London? Again, no one seems to know: perhaps that would be a good subject for fiction. In any case, here is what Isaiah Berlin writes in his book about Hamann[5]:

"Descartes believed that it was possible to acquire knowledge of reality from a priori sources, by deductive reasoning. This, according to Hamann, is the first appalling fallacy of modern thought. The only true subverter of this false doctrine was Hume, whom Hamann read with enthusiastic agreement. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the Bible and Hume are the two oddly interwoven roots of his ideas."

Oddly interwoven indeed. Anyway, here, in this brilliant and enigmatic figure, the son of Protestant pietists, whose writings are as difficult to interpret as alchemical or cabbalistic texts, we find the two elements, Absolute Omnipotence and Nominalism, coming together. Hamann, aka The Magus of the North, had a direct and strong influence on Herder, on Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, and on Kierkegaard, who considered him an "enormous genius." Through these and surely other conduits, Hamann had a strong if indirect influence, too, on Shestov and Fondane.

Isaiah Berlin writes[6]: "Hamann's great enemy is necessity – metaphysical or scientific. Here he suspects that a specific human vision – a moment of illumination or ordinary understanding, in which a man grasped his situation and knew how to act, in order to achieve his spontaneously conceived ends – was turned into a pseudo-objective source of authority – a formula, a law, an institution, something outside men, conceived as eternal, unalterable, universal; a world of necessary truths, mathematics, theology, politics, physics, which man did not make and cannot alter, crystalline, pure, an object of divine worship for atheists. He rejects this absolutely. No bridge is needed between necessary and contingent truths because the laws of the world in which man lives are as contingent as the 'facts' in it. All that exists could have been otherwise if God had so chosen, and can be so still. God's creative powers are unlimited, man's are limited; nothing is eternally fixed, at least nothing in the human world – outside it we know nothing, at any rate in this life. The 'necessary' is relatively stable, the 'contingent' is relatively changing, but this is a matter of degree, not kind." Now these words could be equally applied, verbatim, to Lev Shestov and to Benjamin Fondane. They, like Hume, Hamann, Jacobi and Kierkegaard, set faith high above and before abstract reason. They also took the Genesis story of the Fall, of Eve's and Adam's disobedience, as literally descriptive of the human condition.

This brings us to the third element in Shestov's and Fondane's philosophy, which I will call the tragic, or simply the theatrical, element. Hateful necessity, according to Shestov and Fondane, rules over our everyday dealings with the world. Here I must remind you, parenthetically, that Shestov's and Fondane's idea of necessity was 19th century strict determinism, unmitigated by statistical or quantum mechanics, unsoftened by American Pragmatism or chaos theory. It is the sort of determinism – two plus two equals four and that's it, baby – against which Dostoevsky's character, the Underground Man, railed. But here's the dramatic element: there are situations where the rule of necessity stops. These are the dire, extreme situations when we are confronted with the abyss. Daniel in the lions' den. Dostoevsky in Siberia before the firing squad. In such situations, if we have a strong enough faith in the omnipotence of God, we can suddenly

awake from our nightmare to find ourselves in a different world, a realm of unfettered freedom, where necessity and causality have no hold. Such was Shestov's and Fondane's belief, or such, at least, was the shape of what they hoped to believe. But *both* conditions, absolute faith in the omnipotence of God *and* being confronted by the abyss, were *necessary* for the awakening. Necessity reappeared, so to speak, through the back door. Or, in different words, necessity adheres to freedom-from-necessity.

Just as Absolute Omnipotence and Nominalism make each other more plausible, the same is the case with the tragic element and Nominalism; although, again, let me insist, there is no logical entailment one way or the other. In fact, it is at times of crisis, at life's thorough shakeups, that the laws which we have believed unchangeable, eternal, are more likely to be revealed to us as no more than habits acquired during normal times, as Hume maintained. That revelation comes like the anagnoresis of tragic plays, through which, finally, a higher truth is achieved. The interplay of plausibility between the three elements – Absolute Omnipotence of God, Nominalism and the Tragic – makes of Shestov's and Fondane's philosophy a harmonious whole.

D. H. Lawrence, in a 1920's essay, wrote that Shestov was expressing a Russian, non-Western element in his writings[7]. The Russian poet Joseph Brodsky thought that Shestov was the one and only Russian continuator of Dostoevsky's spirit[8]. All the elements I have distinguished here, however – Absolute Omnipotence, Nominalism and the Tragic – have ancient Western filiations. There are, surely, specifically Russian and Romanian features in the prose style, as well as in the themes, in the references, and in certain details of Shestov's and Fondane's work, but not when it comes to the three basic elements of their philosophy. British nominalism and empiricism play there a far more important role.

In the case of Shestov, if we are to speak of the Jewish aspects of his thought, we should, with equal if not more justification, speak of its Lutheran aspects, given the important influence on him of Luther, Hamann and Kierkegaard. With Fondane it is different. In his youth he wrote some essays in Romanian on Jewish mysticism[9], essays in which he, like Gershom Scholem, placed Gnosticism at the root of Kabala and of Hassidism. I have shown elsewhere[10] that Gnostic elements play an important role in Fondane's posthumously published book, *Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre*. To the extent that Hassidism is the channel through which Fondane encountered those Gnostic elements, we may properly speak of the Jewish aspect of his thought[11].

After the death of Shestov in 1938, and as WWII approached, Fondane had the premonition that he was not to survive it, and he gave copies of his most precious possession (as he put it), the text of his *Conversations with Shestov*, to several people for safekeeping. During the Occupation Fondane did not leave Paris. He lived with his wife Geneviève and his sister Lina at 6 rue Rollin, in the Quartier Latin. In March 1944, Benjamin and his sister were arrested by the French police and taken to the Drancy prison camp (Geneviève was not Jewish). During the days that followed, Fondane refused to be freed, which was a possibility, unless his sister was freed too. Soon they were both deported to Auschwitz.

Certainly we should honor Benjamin Fondane's memory together with the memory of all the victims of the Shoa. Yet, if we are to honor his thought as well, we should take it seriously. We should envisage the possibility, perhaps remote, that right when he was being led to the gas chamber he suddenly awoke from that nightmare to a world of absolute freedom. Perhaps a world where time had – or has – ended. A world to us, however, unimaginable.

NOTES

[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 25, 3-4; Blackfriars, 1964, vol. V, p. 160 ff.

[2] Perhaps Aquinas is here arguing against Petrus Damiani (1007-1072), Doctor of the Church since 1823, who maintained that God has the power to alter the past. *See* Pierre Damien, *Lettre sur la toute-puissance divine*, Sources Chrétiennes, Paris, 1972.

[3] Hans Jonas, *Der Gottesbegrieff nach Auschwitz, Eine jüdische Stimme*, Frankfurt am Main, 1984. The Austrian writer and poet Franz Werfel, too, believed that God is in need of redemption by us.

[4] "Disputation Against Scholastic Theology," in Martin Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 16.

[5] Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North; J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, New York, 1993.

[6] Isaiah Berlin, *loc. cit*., pp. 44-45.

[7] *See* D. H. Lawrence's Foreword to Shestov's *All Things Are Possible*.

[8] Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One, Selected Essays*, New York, 1986, p. 277.

[9] Translated into French by R. Fotiade in "Cahiers Benjamin Fondane", no. 2, Automne 1998, pp. 33-68.

[10] "Le Joujou gnostique" in *Une Poétique du gouffre*, M. Jutrin et G. Vanhese, Éditions Rubbettino, 2003, pp. 129-135.

[11] At a conference in Jerusalem in 1998 (unpublished), Moshe Idel, the scholar of Jewish mysticism, expressed the opinion that Fondane's thought is essentially Hassidic.

Trois éléments dans la pensée de Chestov et de Fondane

Résumé

J'essaie de distinguer trois éléments communs dans la philosophie de Chestov et de Fondane. Ce sont le suivants : (a) l'omnipotence absolue de Dieu, (b) le nominalisme, et (c) le tragique. Sans prétendre que cette triade soit exhaustive, je l'utilise pour situer Chestov et Fondane dans la tradition de la pensée occidentale.