On the Specifics of Russian Philosophy: A Reply to Mikhail Sergeev

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Mikhail Sergeev presents a view on Russian philosophy that, until recently, dominated both Russian and international historical-philosophical literature. On this view, one interprets Russian philosophy as religious-orthodox in its essence. Accordingly, everything else comprising Russian philosophy gets presented as the result of western European influence and, therefore, is not original to it. However, since the 1990’s, the character and the direction of philosophical investigation in Russia has changed. Beginning in 2010, different views on the cultural-historical sense of the Russian philosophical tradition have arisen and reduced the role of religious orthodoxy. Still, this approach unrightfully narrows the circle of personalities, ideas, and topics that actually formed the Russian philosophical tradition and, as a result, limits an understanding of Russian culture as an intellectual and existential source of this tradition.

Beyond this narrow scope are dozens of original thinkers and the entire directions of thought—Russian philosophy of psychology (Georgiy Ivanovich Chelpanov, Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, Sergey Leonidovich Rubinstein, etc.), unique logical investigations (Mikhail Ivanovich Karinsky, Nikolay Aleksandrovich Vasiliev, Vladimir Nikolaevich Ivanovsky), the ideas of phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics (Gustav Gustavovich Shpet, Roman Osipovich Yakobson) and others. Even the ideas of religious philosophers are impoverished (for example, the semiotic ideas of Father Pavel Florensky). Further, these developments do not include directions such as Russian neo-Kantianism.

“Impoverishing” Thought

To clarify of our thesis regarding the “impoverishing” of Russian philosophical thought, we offer an analogy to the Western-European philosophical tradition. Christianity, of course, played an important role in its formation, but its intellectual content, its personalities, and its

basic themes are not limited to Christian influence, just as the European culture that sustained philosophy for two thousand and fifty hundred years is not limited to Christian ideas. In European philosophy, one studies thinkers as different as Kant and Nietzsche, Pascal and Descartes, Spinoza and Kierkegaard alongside one another. European thinkers do not try to reduce French philosophy to Catholic doctrine, or the German intellectual tradition to Protestant canons.

There is an idea of philosophy as a cultural phenomenon, the specifics of which are in a particular relation to the world—a reflexive and self-reflexive one—and the icons of its expression vary in different nations. Meanwhile, international specialists in the history of Russian philosophy often reduce Russian philosophy and, by extension, Russian culture to Orthodoxy. A powerful influence in developing of this point of view were the publications of histories of Russian philosophy prepared by philosophers—emigrants of the orthodox orientation in different years (Vasily Vasilievich Zenkovsky, Nikolay Onufrievich Lossky, Sergey Aleksandrovich Levitsky and others). However, in analysing the positive aspects of their works, it was not often mentioned that emigration resulted in these philosophers knowing only one social sphere of “Russian” reality—the Orthodox church (all other forms of sociality such as state, language and culture were alien). Consequently, philosophers stressed in their work the role of Orthodox religion in the formation of Russian intellectual culture. Detecting the Orthodox specifics of the Russian intellectual tradition, therefore, can be counted as a form of philosophical self-identification (as mentioned above regarding historians of Russian philosophy). The spread of these self-identifications in broad humanistic and historical-philosophical circles provides clear evidence of these “orthodox” influenced schemes of Russian thought and cultural development in Western world.

Today, it is obvious that the excessive emphasis on the confessional component stimulates interest in Russian philosophy and culture; yet, to rather exotic, mysterious and mystical phenomena. In addition, the accentuation of Orthodox religion deepens the gap between Russian pre-revolution philosophy and philosophical approaches of the Soviet period—the continuity becomes lost, the interconnection of these two periods of Russian intellectual cultural development vanishes (a connection not recognized by many at first glance). Thus, the confessional focus of the Russian intellectual tradition greatly impoverishes the intellectual content of Russian culture and its philosophy.

Issues of Translation

Mikhail Sergeev points out, in particular, that there exists a tradition of translating the term tsel’noe into English as integral. We are familiar with the reasons for this translation. But we are not satisfied with the translation itself. The fact of the matter is that the basis of both the

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English word *integrity* and its Russian calque *integrivny* are lay Latin words— *integrum* (complete, *tseloe*), *integration* (integration, *vostanovlenie, vospolnenie*)—that in Russian mean *unity* (*ob’edinenie*), *interpenetration* (*vzaimoproniknovenie*). In its origin the condition of integral knowledge is disconnected—after it is restored, completed—that presupposes the integration of various elements (or parts) into one. However, *whole*—*tsel’noe*—knowledge in the Russian philosophical tradition is not restored from different parts but originally whole, complete, undividable, indecomposable on various separate elements, self-evident—i.e. requesting the grasp and understanding of the sense in communication, in the sphere of talk. Only such knowledge has a concrete nature, has *dignity* (to use a term of Pamfil Danilovich Yurkevich). The concreteness and focus on communication today can be considered a characteristic feature of Russian philosophy. In our translation, we relied on the change in the content of term *tsel’noe* that occurred in Russian philosophy in the 20th century. We find it important to outline the differences of the apparent philosophical sense that began to form in the religious-philosophical works of Ivan Vasilievich Kireevsky, Vladimir Sergeevich Solovyov and Pamfil Danilovich Yurkevich which adds further concrete logical, phenomenological and hermeneutical connotations in the works of Mikhail Ivanovich Karinsky, and Gustav Gustavovich Shpet.

If we lose these perspectives it means, for example, that we overlook the basis of Gustav Shpet’s phenomenological ideas (the originality of which was valued by Husserl). We also lose Shpet’s emphasis on hermeneutics’ epistemological role. On this issue, Shpet wrote with reference to the Russian tradition of “positive (*polozhitel’naya*) philosophy” 10 that remains unmentioned by Sergeev as his attention is focused on the idea of *integral* knowledge based on faith. Meanwhile, Shpet wrote to Husserl that he searched for the basis of phenomenology in Plato’s works.11 In the process of writing *History as a Problem of Logic,12* Shpet was interested in how the problem of the cognition of historical reality was postulated before Kant, who tore reason from sensuality.

The theory of knowledge which followed Kant’s raised the question of how to “stitch” together what Kant pulled apart (in the works of the neo-Kantians, for example, and of religious philosophers). Some philosophers who took this road followed reason, some followed sensuality, and some pursued mysticism. Shpet (as well as structuralism and semasiology) demonstrated that dividing reason and sensuality is not productive, and suggested that Kant made a mistake. Knowledge is indeed a primarily whole and the source of cognition are words since—even in the case when we represent the outer world with our sense organs or if we logically construct, and after substantiate, the imagined world—we can justify ourselves only when we verbally inform other people about our actions.

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For Shpet, knowledge is born from the act of communication. Thereafter, the problematics of cognition shift from the problem of reason and sensuality corresponding to the problematics of expressing what is known. In order not to miss this principal change in epistemological problematics that is found in the Russian philosophical tradition we, speaking of whole knowledge, do not use the term “integrative knowledge” (because this term is associated and assigned with a certain epistemological tradition). We refer the reader to Shpet’s idea of “intelligible intuition” that allows people, including scientists, to understand each other. Exactly this aspect of wholeness puts Shpet in the tradition of Russian philosophy because, as a foundation of communication, it unites the concreteness and universality of knowledge. As a consequence, Shpet addresses Yurkevich who rigidly follows epistemological traditions of Plato and Kant. After Yurkevich relates his ideas on God, Shpet corrects him. In epistemology, we must speak not about God but about humans. This is the main point that we articulated in considering the Russian epistemological tradition. In the framework of this tradition, knowledge emerges as having a certain and special sign-symbolic structure the investigation of which requires a special theory of knowledge—a hermeneutical one.

**Russian Philosophy’s Emergence**

We could give quotes of Russian philosophers who support our thoughts about the existence of a specific Russian epistemological tradition. Also, we could offer numerous arguments by contemporary Russian investigators on this topic. For example, we could detail Chubarov’s position who wrote about Kireevsky, Solovyov and Homyakov as precursors of phenomenology in Russia in the *Anthology of Phenomenological Thought on Russia.* But, to sum up the results of our discussion with Sergeev, let us point out the following.

A modern look at the content, cultural sense, and place of Russian philosophy at the end of the 19th, and the beginning of the 20th, century connects with the emergence of a new dimension in the research work of historians of Russian philosophy—of the orientation on actualizing the Russian philosophical legacy as a whole cultural phenomenon, and on its correlation with modern philosophical problematics. The formation of this view on the specifics of Russian philosophy was realized by the project “Russian Philosophy of the First Half of the 20th Century.” During the period between 2012 and 2017, 26 volumes about Russian philosophers were published. These publications focus on the modern character of Russian philosophers’ ideas, fitting them within the framework of actual philosophical problematics. More than 100 Russian and international researchers of Russian philosophy collaborated on the project.

It is to the project’s findings that we addressed our article—“The Ideas of Cultural-Historical Epistemology in Russian Philosophy of the Twentieth Century”—in *Social Epistemology.* The article did not pretend to be historically-philosophically complete; its main aim was to lend this unique view on Russian philosophy to one aspect of epistemology.

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Given the article’s length and purpose we neither explored the new, now forming, view on Russian philosophy, nor the overall historical-philosophical investigation of terminological apparatus (and conceptual language) of the Russian philosophical tradition.

We are grateful to Social Epistemology and Mikhail Sergeev who provided us the opportunity to touch on these topics in the response to his critical considerations.

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