G. Shpet and hermeneutics

Abstract: Article purpose is to show the significance of the ideas of Shpet for the development of Russian philosophy and the Russian hermeneutics. Particular attention is given to the relationship of word and personality in the process of understanding. The emphasis is on the relevance of hermeneutic developments of the thinker for the present.

Keywords: philosophy, science, hermeneutics, postmodernism, the word.

The name of the philosopher Gustav Gustavovich Shpet became known to a wide range of readers interested in the problems of philosophy relatively recently — in the first years of perestroika. In 1989 in the Appendix to the magazine «Questions of philosophy» such important for the comprehension of the philosopher’s creativity works as «Sketch of the development of Russian philosophy», «Aesthetic fragments» and «Introduction to ethnic psychology» were published. Despite the long oblivion of the name of Shpet, the presentation of the development of philosophy in Russia would not be complete without acquaintance with his works. Shpet made an indisputable contribution to Russian and world culture in general by his research in philosophy, psychology, aesthetics and linguistics.

Shpet believed that science could never and cannot exist without the support of philosophy. He wrote: «Scientific views and any ideology should rely on the philosophical foundation for there is no other knowledge about the principles» [1, 36]. According to Shpet, philosophy also cannot exist without the spiritual creativity, penetrating to different spheres of human existence. He believed that modern development of humanity has come to a new, significant stage in the development of science and philosophy. In this favorable situation, the philosopher said, «we can at least identify requirements that philosophy must meet as a "basic science"» [1, 37].

In his conception of philosophy Shpet explicitly relied on the ancient tradition. Philosophy for him is «free, pure, absolute philosophical knowledge» [1, 37]. In many respects the philosophy of A. Bergson was consonant for him. Shpet’s ideas that only reasonable and only intellectual approach to understanding of the world is limited, resonate with the intuitivism of a French thinker. He believed that only peering into the variability of the sensory world we touch the essential, the eternal principles of life.

Nowadays of special interest are his works on the development of philosophy in Russia, as well as difficulties in understanding of a language, of a sign. Shpet made his original contribution to the formation of such a science as hermeneutics, which became especially topical since the second half of the XXth century in connection with the appearance of post-modernism. As it is known, one of the important features of «postmodern sensitivity» is increased attention to the cultures of different countries and peoples. Postmodernism is characterized by the absence of a unified style: eclecticism becomes the fundamental attribute of new culture. In this regard, the issues addressed to postmodernists, closely drawn together with the development of the hermeneutic interpretation of history and art. Purely postmodern forms of hermeneutics — hermeneutics of suspicion and hermeneutic of deconstructivism are even formed.

In this connection, Shpet’s works written in 1917–18 («History as a matter of logic» and «Hermeneutics and its problems») are especially interesting. The importance of philosophy for understanding of history and problems of cognition is indisputable for Shpet. His words that the notion of science only according to the model of mathematical of science is limited as actual till now. In philosophy as a special form of knowledge its dialectical nature, «joint thinking in the true and full meaning» [1, 191] are important. «Philosophy had one subject — specific; subject of concrete reality» [1, 192] — said the philosopher. The highest manifestation of specific things are social and historical things. A historical torrent appears in all its complexity, in all its diversity. Scientists try to solve the problem of skill attainment of the diverse torrent. Shpet believes that empiricism with its limited understanding of the experience cannot cope with this task. «Experiencing does not see «eye», «mind», — eye is its obedient tool» [1, 197] — said the philosopher. Considering the various manifestations of expert knowledge of history, Shpet emphasizes the importance of skill in observation, experience, and understanding. «Cognition begins with the moment of reading and understanding of this word. To be able to observe and be able to read means the same in empirical cognition: to be able to understand the meaning of the verbal sign that points to the corresponding part of the reality» [1, 229]. Thus, a word as a sign gains in the process of understanding the utmost importance. Hermeneutics becomes the theory of cognition of history.

Analyzing the history of the development of hermeneutics, Shpet identifies those features in the doctrines of the thinkers who, in his opinion, were the most fruitful and to the greatest extent contributed to the understanding and the development of hermeneutic problems. For example, the significance of the ideas of Aurelius Augustine in what he contributed to «the expansion of the content of hermeneutics, having added to the problem whether the word is monosemantic or polysemantic the problem of a sign in general and the problem of understanding as the transition from a sign to a value” [1, 263].

In Flaciy’s research Shpet emphasizes his concept on the need to understand each part from the context of the whole. Later this idea will find applications in the famous notion of a «hermeneutic circle».

For Shpet, hermeneutics is first of all understanding through a word. «A word is evidence of a message first of all. A word is not only a phenomenon of nature, but it is also the principle of culture. A word is the archetype of culture; culture — the cult of understanding, words are incarnation of the mind» [2, 380]. He also insists on the fact that the subject of hermeneutics should be understood rather widely. Along with the consideration of issues relating to the history, science and art, it focuses on the identity of the creator.

«With every word of the author we now begin to hear his voice, to guess his thoughts, to suspect his behavior. Words retain all their value, but we are interested in some special intimate sense having its own intimate forms. The value of a word is accompanied by a co-value» [2, 470]. «In General, the personality of the author acts as the analogy of a word. The personality is the word and requires its understanding» [2, 471]. As it is known, hermeneutics is much
obliged to German philosopher F. Schleiermacher. Shpet notes the importance of Schleiermacher’s recognition of the relationship of hermeneutics and thinking. But, as the philosopher suggests, Schleiermacher stops in front of the problem of «understanding as it is, and meaning as it is». What is interpreted is understood by Shpet in a more complicated manner than by Schleiermacher. «What is interpreted must not be quite alien to us, but it must not be quite ours» [1, 320] — Shpet said. Hermeneutics as the art of understanding, as Shpet considers, should not be only reduced to the external, positive interpretation. He insists on the fact that avoiding of purely philosophical perspective is unfavorable for any scientific research.

The disadvantage is the ambition to reduce the problem of understanding to psychologism. Shpet reveals this disadvantage in the works of many thinkers who studied the problems of hermeneutics. We must study not only the problems of grammar and psychology, but also try to understand the «surroundings and relationships of nature, and finally a historical event, institutions and morality, states and activities in the national spirit. It is this type of interpreting that seems especially important for us» [1, 360] — the philosopher thinks.

Great attention is paid by Shpet to the development of ideas about hermeneutics in the works of the German philosopher Dilthey and the German historian I. G. Droysen. Dilthey’s merit, according to Shpet, is in the fact that he demonstrated the importance of hermeneutics for the consideration of history and all the sciences about spirit. «For modern justification of sciences of spirit it is hermeneutics that gives a starting-point of the highest value» [1, 382], noted Dilthey. But Shpet is not satisfied with Dilthey’s bright psychological setting in the understanding of hermeneutics as a science of an inner experienced reality, although Dilthey in the development of problems of hermeneutics goes further than Schleiermacher, addressing the problem of intercommunion of the internal and the external (in this connection it is worth to recall the famous Dilthey’s words that «the human spirit speaks from the stones of marble, from musical sounds, gestures, words and writings, deeds, economic organizations and institutions») [1, 384]. Thus, Dilthey turned to the problem of language and expanded the art of understanding to the philosophical generalizations. But according to Shpet, Dilthey did not understand fully the importance of considering the problems of a sign. For Shpet a sign and a word are the main facts of the development of culture and the solution of the problems of hermeneutics and our «coming in» into culture depend on their understanding. And not accidentally the ideas of hermeneutics are closely associated with the development of semiotics and structuralism.

The depth and the compactness of a thought and manners of its exposition by Shpet admire us. In a few words or lines he could express both his attitude to all sorts of philosophical ideas and his own point of view. You can only imagine what heights the philosophical thought in Russia would have reached, if there had not been known tragic events.

Modern are Shpet’s words about the necessity of comprehension of true vital essence, hidden behind the surface of sensual and rational experience. The Russian philosopher considered it necessary to be able to see and to understand the meaning of what is happening both in life and in science and philosophy. And now, to all who doubts the need to study and to know philosophy and believes that its role in our world is extremely low, it is worth recalling the words of one of the most brilliant Russian thinkers: «Philosophy is designed not to solve the tasks of a physicist or a historian but to show him his own roots, starts and to bring the universal base under huge modern knowledge» [1, 39].

And it’s not just that Shpet was much ahead of his time, developing the ideas and principles extremely important for modern philosophical thought. His ideas are often much more productive than the modern philosophical concepts of postmodern and post-structuralistic persuasion. Not getting into philosophical relativism, so characteristic for the «postmodern sensitivity», he, at the same time, operates by very flexible techniques of philosophical analysis and philosophy design, gives brilliant samples of generalized philosophical analysis of the specific, complex phenomena.

The principles of modern hermeneutics developed by him are not out of date nowadays but they retain a great potential for further development.

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Rationality as an attribute of sociality

Abstract: It’s asserted in the article that the idea of different “types of rationality” leads to the methodologically inappropriate increasing of the number of such types. In the opinion of the author the real differences in thoughts or ways of existence are embodiments of one and the same rationality as an attribute of the social mode of human existence.

Keywords: rationality, types of rationality, irrationality, attribute of sociality.

The idea of different “types of rationality” has been developed in the 20th century in a lot of philosophical and humanitarian contexts. It will not be exaggeration to say that by the early 21st century this idea has acquired the status of a methodological principle in researches not only of the history of culture as a whole, but of the essence of its separate phenomena, such as philosophy, science, religion, art, policy, etc. Indication to the special “type of rationality” is treated today as an essential basis for understanding any other differences between the subjects of culture or the results of their activities [See: 1; 2; 3; 5; 6; 7].

The use of the term “rationality” in science has always been a part of the ideological self-assertion of science as the “higher”, the