

The Stoic tradition in Russian and Western existentialism: Lev Shestov and Karl Jaspers

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The article investigates the Stoic tradition in Russian and Western existentialism, drawing on the example of the philosophy of L. Shestov and K. Jaspers. Applying the methods of textual analysis, the study focuses on their accounts of what the Stoics did and preached (or would have done and preached), instead of revealing alleged conceptual affinities between Stoic philosophy and existentialism. The author shows that both thinkers used these accounts as crucial points of reference, developing and upholding their own key doctrines: refutation of rationalism (L. Shestov), the experience of boundary situations and existential communication (K. Jaspers). Yet, they expressed serious criticism of Stoic ideas and emphasised that people would not achieve the highest aim of philosophising if they pursued the strategies of the Stoics. The study highlights the fact that L. Shestov and K. Jaspers were neither historians of philosophy nor proponents of Stoicism and examined not Stoic doctrines but a set of certain Stoic values. The form and content of their arguments make it possible to consider them as coherent Stoic narratives. Thus, the article suggests that accounts of Stoic attitudes and values offered in Russian and Western existentialism give an essential guide as to how one ought or ought not to exist, act and think.

Keywords: Stoics, Stoicism, Stoic narrative, existentialism, irrationalism, boundary situations, Jaspers, Shestov.

Introduction

B. Inwood, one of the most distinguished contemporary scholars in the field of Stoic studies, had good reasons to use the metaphor “an intellectual Odyssey” [1], when discussing the problems of an intellectual engagement with Stoicism. In fact, both Stoic philosophy in antiquity and the Stoic tradition in Western intellectual life had a rich and colourful history. As mentioned by J. Sellars, the Stoic tradition beyond the end of antiquity was nothing else than “a variety of appropriations and resurrections of Stoic ideas” [2, p. 1]. There are several reasons that defined it. Firstly, the authentic Stoic sources that we possess are fragmentary and unsystematic [3, p. 7–8]. Unfortunately, the legacy of the Roman Stoics does not depict in all the details the school’s theories. It produced an impressive variety of interpretations of Stoic ideas. Secondly, the portrayal of the Stoics was controversial because they could be portrayed positively as well as negatively in accordance with contradictory tendencies that scholarship on Stoic philosophy showed. It is also important that scholars sometimes expressed their personal prejudices, interpreting Stoic

teaching [3, p. 8]. Thirdly, it is obvious enough that many European philosophers, who wrote about the Stoics, were not so much interested in Stoic philosophy as in articulating their own views. Consequently, they could consider Stoic ideas in the context of their own doctrines frequently founded on utterly alien ideas to what might be called “Stoic ontology” [4, p. 249]. Finally, for many people the word *Stoic* brings to mind the vague image of certain attitudes and behaviour. There is no doubt that this contributes to people’s understanding of who the Stoics were¹.

A representative example of what has been discussed above is the Stoic tradition in twentieth-century existential philosophy. Indeed, J.-P. Sartre, K. Jaspers, L. Shestov, A. Camus, N. A. Berdyaev, P. Tillich, et al. proved to be concerned with Stoic ideas, which were interpreted by them in various fashion. This issue has received careful consideration in the research. However, what should be noted is that this problem is *often* analysed from a purely theoretical perspective, which focuses on *conceptual affinities*. It allows to emphasise either a stark contrast between the teachings of existentialists and Stoic philosophy or the fact that “they both pivot on a perpetual process of choice backlit by a healthy awareness of mortality and an understanding of life as a project” and give “a common emphasis on the theme of responsibility” [6, p. 541]. The latter tendency seems to be dominant (especially among Russian scholars) [7, p. 113–116; 8; 9, p. 299–300; 10]. Meanwhile, what draws our attention is not the fact of supposed conceptual affinities between the doctrines of these philosophical movements. It is rather a different (perhaps, more distinct) dimension, namely, what existentialists *wrote* about the Stoics, their moral strategies and attitudes, actions, way of life, etc.

Taking into consideration all the points mentioned above, we are going to analyse and compare two accounts of what the Stoics did and preached (or would have done or preached) in the writings of L. Shestov and K. Jaspers. This choice is based on careful thought. On the one hand, the Stoic tradition in their writings has attracted scant attention so far. On the other hand, the outstanding philosophers had a lot in common. Both were concerned with religious attitudes toward the world and, what is more, both used Stoic ideas as a crucial point of reference, developing and upholding their own doctrines. All this enables us not only to make a valid comparison but also to build up a representative picture of the Stoic tradition within existentialism.

Discussion

On the surface, Shestovian texts provide ample evidence of the importance of Stoic ideas for European philosophy. The philosopher constantly emphasised that “the Stoics have played a fundamental role in the history of philosophy” [11, p. 28] and that it would be impossible “to name any philosophical system the basis and deepest roots of which were not Stoic” [12, p. 342]. Furthermore, according to the thinker the influence of the Stoics is not limited to the domain of the history of philosophy. The Stoics “gradually took possession of the mind of thinking mankind” [13, p. 299] and “it cannot even be imagined what would have become of European thought if the ideas sown in the world by the Stoics had not flowered so bright” [14, p. 349].

¹ One possible explanation for the uncertain character of the Stoic tradition is connected with the way it represents itself in culture. In our previous research we tried to distinguish several dimensions of the Stoic tradition in the history of thought: the study of Stoic philosophy, Stoicism and Stoic narrative [5].

Nevertheless, one should take into consideration the mere fact that L. Shestov credited Stoic ideas with having immense significance only in order to make a scathing attack on them. Indeed, he devoted his philosophy to the problem of a bitter conflict between “irrational, incomprehensible spontaneity of life and the abstract principles that ‘destroy’ life” [15, p. 125]. That is why L. Shestov, who vigorously opposed the dominance of reason and morality, differs entirely from the Stoics. In his opinion, the core message of the Stoic teachings is the idea that one must “rise above his particular, personal existence, his ‘accidental’ individuality” [11, p. 28–29], renounce and destroy oneself “before the impersonal reason, before ‘the law’” [16, p. 256]. To grasp the essence of this statement, let us turn to his criticism of a strategy proposed by Epictetus in *Discourses* 3.20.

It is remarkable that in the Russian philosopher’s opinion the discourse 3.20. expresses most accurately the essence of Stoic teachings. It is devoted to the idea that good and evil depend upon us, namely, that getting proper notions of, for example, poverty, sickness, death, etc., makes it possible to derive benefits from all these things. Epictetus called this principle “wand of Hermes”. This metaphor seems to have a deep affinity with the philosopher’s concept of *prohairesis* (volition). By exerting this aspect of psychology people can choose how to react freely to impressions.

It is important that discourse 3.20 is entitled “That Advantages May Be Derived from Everything External”. Yet, there is no doubt that L. Shestov would have objected to the proposed title. He believed that philosophers in antiquity did not content themselves with the role of contemplators. They could not come to terms with the fact that people had to depend on any “good” that came from outside: not only from the outer world but even from God. L. Shestov believed that the Stoic idea of living in accord with Nature implied living in harmony with Reason, i.e. in defiance of Nature [13, p. 304]. He insisted that the Stoics taught about the vanity and nothingness of all external things (bad and good) and wanted to create along with the existing world “a new world of their own where they will own and rule” [17, p. 226]. That is why Epictetus, neglecting human experience and despising what people usually loved and valued [12, p. 342–343; 18, p. 146–147], sought after “Hermes’ wand”. By its magic touch, “multifarious, self-contradictory content of experience is turned into immovable, always self-identical and, hence, ‘comprehensible’ idea” [12, p. 358], namely, into “good”. To put it differently, in order to enjoy complete autonomy, the Stoics had to refuse any ready-made “good” and create their own one, because only then it could be in their power. In Shestovian terms, this strategy reveals the idea of substituting ontology for ethics.

Thus, we are now in a position to understand Shestovian words: “The Stoics themselves would have approved of Pascal’s iron girdle, which symbolized his willingness to submit his ‘ego’ to one or more of the eternal and immaterial truths. The Stoics, like Pascal, saw plainly that unless the ‘egos’ were first annihilated there could never be any unity or order. The human ‘egos’ are infinitely numerous, each one considers itself the centre of the universe and demands to be treated as though he were alone in existence. There can obviously be no way of reconciling these demands and satisfying them all. Until the ‘ego’ has been abolished, there will always be chaos and ineptitude instead of union and harmony” [19, p. 303].

We can safely assume that if an expert in Stoic philosophy examined L. Shestov’s interpretation of the Stoic teachings, he would consider it to be blatantly false. Indeed, it was the Stoics who played a crucial role in generating (not in abolishing) an idea of person.

And although they came up with a doctrine that everyone “has at least one inalienable possession — the essence of the individual self, as defined by each human being’s autonomy or capacity to give or withhold assent” (synkatathesis) [20, p. 340] — it was not the doctrine of abstract freedom. On the contrary, as A. A. Long puts it, Stoic philosophy had “both self-regarding and socially useful implications” [20, p. 357]. The Stoics connected the idea of being properly human not only with the idea of being a member of the human community, but even with the concept of property-ownership [20, p. 339], because the appropriation of private property “is a natural human tendency and one that helps to establish the individual’s identity as such” [20, p. 357].

With regards to such a puzzling interpretation, an explanation is to be given. It is generally accepted that L. Shestov frequently presented “distorted or over-simplified accounts of the philosophers’ position to introduce or corroborate his own position” [21, p. 103; 22, p. xii]. A striking example of this approach is a Shestovian interpretation of the fragment of *Discourses* 2.20. (29–31), which is devoted to the refutation of skepticism. In this discourse, Epictetus, accepting the role of a slave, gives a vivid picture of an imaginary dialogue between himself and a master (who is a Pyrrhonian skeptic). The slave is instructed to bring some oil and then gruel, but he torments his master. Instead of oil and gruel, the slave brings fish sauce and vinegar sauce. The master tries to protest, referring to the smell and taste of brought things, but the slave objects: “How do you know if the senses deceive us?” Epictetus concluded: “If I had had three or four fellow-slaves who felt as I did, I would have made him burst with rage and hang himself, or else change his opinion” [23, p. 381].

The plot of Shestovian interpretation, setting aside its slighter twists, revolves around a different issue. It is centered not on the refutation of skepticism but on fierce attack on the opponents of Necessity and law of contradiction. In *Athens and Jerusalem*, Epictetus, being enraged by the attempt to escape this law, develops the storyline discussed above and says: “Or again, the master orders me to shave him, and I cut off his ear or nose with the razor. He would again yell, but I would repeat to him my arguments. And I would do everything in the same way until I *forced* the master to recognize the truth that Necessity is invincible and the principle of contradiction is omnipotent” [14, p. 354].

Of course, this passage from *Athens and Jerusalem* was not quoted directly from *Discourses*. Yet, it is remarkable that the image of Epictetus, who allegedly threatened his opponents with hemlock, forced them to drink vinegar, cut off their noses and ears, runs through the whole *Athens and Jerusalem* [14, p. 356, 362, 363, 368, 371, 403, 408, 566]. It is also true that Epictetus, as A. A. Long puts it, “repeatedly presents his students with ordinarily very disturbing situations, such as imperial threats, prospects of execution, imprisonment, exile” [20, p. 390]. Nevertheless, the fact is that *real* Epictetus does not act or speak like Shestovian Epictetus.

It is important to understand that L. Shestov was not a scholar, whose aim was to give a correct interpretation of Stoic philosophy. Of course, he was influenced by nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholarship on Stoic philosophy, e. g., E. Zeller, who gave the unfavorable assessment of Hellenistic philosophy. Yet, as a free thinker, he was hardly interested in Stoic dogmas as such. In his writings he subjected *the image* of the Stoics to radical criticism. According to L. Shestov, they appeared to be the most prominent supporters of omnipotent Reason in Western philosophical thought, who did not attempt to disguise the aftermath of rationalism. Against the background of the disturbing, strik-

ing image of the Shestovian Stoics one could better understand the dominant values of L. Shestov's thought: faith, singularity, absurdity, etc. However, it is probably the Shestovian idea of freedom that reveals the extent of philosopher's hostility to Stoic strategies. As I. I. Evlampiev puts it, L. Shestov defined freedom as "the possibility of arbitrary desire, violating all the laws that govern our world" [24, p. 138]. If we wanted to express an anti-Stoic thought, we would hardly do it better.

Let us turn now to the legacy of K. Jaspers. In the words of O. A. Vlasova, his writings are of different styles. On the one hand, he wrote extended, multivolume treatises. On the other hand, he was the author of intelligible essays and speeches [25, p. 197]. That is why we decided to use his book *An Introduction to Philosophy*, which originated in radio lectures targeted a wide audience, as a starting point of further consideration. Admittedly, this general introduction to Jaspersian thought provides an illuminating insight into his interpretation of Stoic ideas. In following we will focus on two conditions that make the realization of *Existenz* possible: the experience of boundary situations and existential communication [26, p. 318].

Coherent Stoic narrative is unfolded in the second chapter of *Introduction*, which is devoted to the sources of philosophy. According to the German thinker, the Stoics "sought the repose of mind" amid the sufferings of life [27, p. 24]. That is why he credited them with clarifying the third (along with wonder and doubt) source of philosophy, namely, a sense of forsakenness [27, p. 23]. It is important to emphasise that K. Jaspers was especially concerned with this theme. To a certain extent it can even be considered to be underlying trend in his views. At any rate, P. Ricoeur believed that in his philosophy "the major emphasis is on exile, solitude, and refusal. This is what moves all his thought toward a kind of romantic speculation on failure" [28, p. 241]. It is the Jaspersian concept of boundary situations that neatly captures this dimension of his views. This theme found its concrete expression in his main pre-war book *Philosophy* (1932). In this work, he even wrote that "to experience boundary situations is the same as *Existenz*" [29, p. 179]. In his *Introduction* the philosopher defined boundary situations as ones that "we cannot evade or change" [27, p. 20]: death, chance, guilt, the uncertainty of the world [27, p. 22]. The boundary situations, thus, are connected with traumatic experience. In the words of F. Peach, "in actual boundary situations, one's way of being is shattered, there is no security in anything, and one has a profound sense of Angst" [30, p. 64].

At first glance it seems that the Stoics were concerned with the same kind of problems. In fact, K. Jaspers emphasised Epictetus' idea that the beginning of philosophy is "a consciousness of men's own weakness and impotence" [23, p. 283]. However, careful consideration of the German thinker's position shows that he did not fail to notice a discrepancy between his own ideas and those of the Stoics. A mere fact is that Stoic strategies do not allow a person to take on the challenge of a boundary situation. K. Jaspers explained: "The advice of the Stoic, to withdraw to our own freedom in the independence of the mind, is not adequate. The Stoic's perception of man's weakness was not radical enough. <...> The Stoic leaves us without consolation; the independent mind is barren, lacking all content. He leaves us without hope, because his doctrine affords us no opportunity of inner transformation, no fulfilment through self-conquest in love, no hopeful expectation of the possible" [27, p. 22–23].

The German philosopher believed that Stoic imperturbability "remains without content and life" [27, p. 24]. He developed this idea in a chapter devoted to the problem of

philosophical independence. Discussing this issue, he wrote that “we do not believe in the calm of the Stoic” because “it is our humanity itself which drives us into passion and fear and causes us in tears and rejoicing to experience what is. Consequently, only by rising from the chains that bind us to our emotions, not by destroying them, do we come to ourselves” [27, p. 119].

One might state a principal objection against this interpretation, pointing out that it is merely an old cliché about “the stony Stoic” [20, p. 380]. Indeed, this distorted image has been reconsidered by contemporary scholars. For example, M. Graver wrote that the Stoic attitude to friendship included “a level of affective engagement” [31, p. 179]. Moreover, she made an interesting remark about the self-sufficiency of the Stoic wise, whose friend had died. “Real happiness,” she wrote, “should be such as cannot be destroyed by any possible kind of loss. It follows that the wise person should be unalarmed by the mortal illness of a friend and should not grieve when friends die. While there might be some tears and a certain amount of pain — for these can come on involuntarily <...> there is no possibility that the wise will enter fully into grief” [31, p. 183].

Thus, it can be said that from the angle of contemporary scholarship Jaspersian criticism seems to bear the marks of interpretative exaggerations. Nevertheless, despite M. Graver’s accurate observation, we still think that K. Jaspers’ criticism of Stoic imperturbability is valid from the philosophical point of view. If we compared his description of the situation of the death of a loved one (*Tod des Nächsten*) with the Stoic attitude to a friend’s death, we would feel the difference. In his *Philosophy*, where he paid considerable attention to the boundary situation of death, he wrote that the death of a loved one could be considered as “the deepest incision in phenomenal life” [29, p. 194], existentially shattering, when a person might be crushed by yearning and parting could be physically unbearable [29, p. 194]. It is unlikely that an existentialist in such a case can be advised by a strategy to guard his happiness and peace of mind with all his might. Thus, we can see that even though the Stoics were not the proponents of cool, extremal impassivity, a level of affective engagement maintained by Jaspersian existentialism is still higher. It should be noted that K. Jaspers highlighted this aspect of Stoic ideas even in his *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* [32, S. 3] as well as in his later philosophical works, e. g. in *The Great Philosophers* in chapters devoted to Jesus [33, p. 90] and Plato [33, p. 169].

Returning to the content of *Introduction*, we see that having discussed three sources of philosophy, K. Jaspers wrote that they were insufficient in the contemporary world. The sources or motives for philosophising can operate only under the condition of communication among men [27, p. 25]. Although the philosopher distinguished several types of communication, we should focus on its highest and most valuable form, namely, existential communication. It is impossible to give an exhaustive definition of it. Unlike things that exist in the world, existential communication cannot be explained in terms of objectifying discourse. As K. Salamun put it, “it can be elucidated only by philosophy and is to be experienced in one’s own life. Existential communication constitutes an intimate, personal relationship between two human beings like friends, lovers, spouses, parent and child, teacher and student, etc.” [34, p. 5].

It is especially noteworthy that K. Jaspers’ account of the issue of communication in *Introduction* is followed by an uncomplimentary remark on the Stoics approach to it: “the Stoical attitude is in fact empty and rigid” [27, p. 26]. It seems that this criticism is well-grounded and stems from the Stoics’ intention to preserve their independence of mind.

Indeed, citing Seneca, “the wise man is content with himself” [35, p.48]. As A. A. Stoliarov puts it, if the most important thing for the Stoic sage is his own perfection, then another person may be of interest to him only in the light of practising his own virtue [36, p. 203–204]. And although the Stoics sought to have friends, to serve society and to take care of their neighbours, this desire for communication bears only a passing resemblance with the one proposed by K. Jaspers. The fact is that within the scope of what might be called “classical philosophising”, individuals were considered to be inherently identical and therefore easily interchangeable [37, p. 33]. The type of communication that can be realised within it remains limited. Let us demonstrate it by referring to the passage from Seneca’s letter cited above. Having said that the wise man could be content with himself, the Roman Stoic added that if he lost his friend, it would be up to him “to decide how soon he makes good the loss” [35, p.48]. It seems to be inappropriate from an existential point of view. This loss will not be made up (at least so easily) just because intimate relationships (i. e. relationships that a person can have with people he or she knows very well and loves very much) cannot be established whenever you want. Indeed, such relationships can be established not with abstract rationality, which is inherent to every sane adult human being, but only with a certain, unique individual. It seems that K. Jaspers, who had considerable professional experience of being a psychiatrist and psychologist [26, p. 319], was in disagreement with the Stoics on this issue quite acutely. This might have happened at the very beginning of his philosophical way. In this context we can mention that in his *Psychology of Worldviews* (1919) [38, S. 90–92] he considered Stoic gestalt to be among *Einstellungen* whose area is “object-less subjectivity” [25, p. 139].

Thus, there is substantial evidence that K. Jaspers used the Stoic ideas as a crucial point of reference, developing and upholding his doctrines of boundary situations and existential communication. And although his interpretation appears to be influenced by widespread clichés about the Stoics’ impassivity and self-sufficiency, his criticism of both moral qualities seems to provide us with a profound insight into the disguised patterns of the Stoic mind. Needless to say, in his opinion, these patterns oppose the main ideas of existentialism.

Conclusions

As we can see, the Stoic tradition played an important role both in Russian and Western existentialism. Having considered the Shestovian and Jaspersian accounts of Stoic thought, we are in a position to shed at least some light on it.

Firstly, the fact that L. Shestov and K. Jaspers were neither classical philologists nor historians of ancient philosophy is of great importance. They did not aim to provide their readers with correct interpretations of Stoic dogmas. Advancing arguments for and against the Stoics, they hardly analysed the physical and logical doctrines of the Stoics in their books. Moreover, they even represented the distorted image of Stoic teachings. It seems that L. Shestov and K. Jaspers examined not doctrines of Stoic philosophy but a set of Stoic values. In our opinion, this strategy could be considered as posing a question of whether certain Stoic ideas provided “a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world” [39, p. 351]. Hence, this fact gives good reasons to say that we are dealing with *Stoic narrative* in the field of existentialism (not with receptions of Stoic philosophy or Stoicism). This corresponds with the words of some contempo-

rary scholars who wrote that, for example, J.-P. Sartre endorsed not *Stoic moral*, but rather a *Stoic attitude* [40, p. 1] or described himself as a “Stoic” “perhaps in the more popular sense of the word” [41, p. 154].

Secondly, although the teachings of the philosophers were distinctly different from each other, both L. Shestov and K. Jaspers expressed serious criticism of the Stoic attitude. In particular, L. Shestov focused on the rationalism of the Stoics, while K. Jaspers emphasised their impassivity and self-sufficiency. It is safe to say that from their point of view people would never achieve the highest aim of philosophising if they pursued the strategies of the Stoics.

Thirdly, the validity of the philosophers’ interpretations can probably be challenged from the angle of contemporary scholarship. This is the case, first and foremost, of L. Shestov, who systematically and deliberately distorted Stoic ideas in order to corroborate his own position. At any rate, both thinkers to some extent were influenced by Stoic studies of their time, which was quite critical of the Stoics. Nonetheless, this does not bring the *importance* of their interpretation into challenge. The vivid and multi-layered Stoic narrative, which unfolds in their writings, is a point of reference for those who are interested in philosophical reflection upon the fundamental issues of human existence.

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Стоическая традиция в русском и западном экзистенциализме: Лев Шестов и Карл Ясперс

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Предметом исследования в настоящей статье выступает стоическая традиция в русском и западном экзистенциализме на примере философии Л. Шестова и К. Ясперса. Применяя метод текстологического анализа, автор реконструирует образ стоиков и их идей в работах указанных философов, вынося за рамки рассмотрения вопрос о возможных концептуальных сходствах доктрин стоиков и экзистенциалистов. В статье показывается, что оба мыслителя использовали описания того, что стоики делали и проповедовали, как важные точки отчета в деле формулировки и защиты собственных доктрин: опровержения рационализма (Л. Шестов), учения о пограничных ситуациях и экзистенциальной коммуникации (К. Ясперс). Вместе с тем оба философа подвергали стоические стратегии бытия в мире серьезной критике, указывая, что с их помощью невозможно достичь высших целей философствования. В статье подчеркивается, что Л. Шестов и К. Ясперс, не будучи ни историками философии, ни адептами стоицизма, уделяли внимание не столько стоическим доктринам как таковым, сколько набору своеобразно проинтерпретированных стоических ценностей. Это позволяет предположить, что в пространстве русской и западной экзистенциальной философии стоическая традиция представлена в виде стоического нарратива. В его рамках повествование о стоиках, интегрированное в философский дискурс того или иного мыслителя, выступает как своеобразный индикатор ценностей, которыми человеку следует или не следует руководствоваться в жизни и мышлении.

Ключевые слова: стоики, стоицизм, стоический нарратив, экзистенциализм, иррационализм, пограничные ситуации, Л. Шестов, К. Ясперс.

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