

Kazakh Philosophy: from Abai to Shakarim

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to analyze the influence of Shakarim - a follower of Abai - on Kazakh philosophy, his worldview and opinion of existential issues. The specifics of the problem under consideration required taking a synthetic approach to the use of various methods in this research. A synthesis of dialectical, metaphysical, rational, intuitive, analytical, phenomenological, historical, and logical methods showed the sources and the dynamic of formation and development of the Kazakh philosophical thought. The novelty of this study is that the main philosophical existential issues are investigated from the perspective of Eastern nomadic philosophy. The originality of the research lies in the fact that the Kazakh philosophical tradition is continuous, discrete, mosaic, autonomous, and original ad initium as a result. Dating back centuries, it returns to us in the form of texts carved in stone and preserved in the unique system of oral storage of information. It is appropriate to develop the national philosophical idea as an original system, like in the times of Shakarim. The national tradition of each culture is of great international interest. This study presents a concept of a harmonious individual according to Shakarim and substantiates the importance of developing national philosophy as an equal member of international dialog.

KEYWORDS

National philosophy, Kazakh philosophical tradition, metaphysics in cognition, philosophical poetry, cognition of existence

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Introduction

The European philosophical tradition that uses universalism prefers distancing itself from the concept of “national philosophy” and considers the existence of special national philosophies impossible (Duncan & Lolordo, 2013). There are national philosophical traditions. Philosophy always has national roots (Ulbrich, 2014).

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Any value-based national philosophical tradition can become a universal philosophy. A nation, a state, and a people are impossible without philosophy, without philosophical comprehension of the world, culture, the human being, and mysteries of cognition. Only philosophical understanding is capable of providing modern tools of life and cognition (Deleuze & Guattari, 2014).

The philosophical tradition in the nomadic society existed mostly in oral form (Tapper, 2013). Kazakh philosophy is little known in the world for the same reason why oral literature rarely becomes an object of sensuous and intellectual apperception, despite the universal nature of human experience that implies equal interest in all cultures and societies. Oral art is not literature in the conventional meaning, since it requires neither letters nor writings. However, rejection is more fundamental and conceptual, since the nomadic world, which actualizes oral traditions and is contained within itself and the steppe, does not correspond with the position of settled cultures and objective order of the world. It is not a matter of traditions of oral literature, which are easily transformed into written literature during the contact stage and then during the sedentary period, or the language barrier, but the nuances of world perception, the metaphysics of the object of cognition and the existentiality of the reflective system of the nomadic worldview on the one hand and the invariant focus of the subject of cognition on the continuity of universal laws, regardless of their observance or nonobservance, and the objectivity of knowledge accepted in the objective society on the other hand (Mahdi, 2015).

Literature Review

Printed works of Kazakh philosophers began emerging in the mid-nineteenth century. The Kazakh philosophical tradition moved to the written dimension. A collection of Abai's poems (1993) was published immediately after his death. Shakarim published his verses and poems in several books, as well as the famous book titled "The Genealogy of Turks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Khan Dynasties" (1990). The poems and philosophical prose of Abai and Shakarim reveal the metaphysics of global coherence of the nomadic world clearly and consistently (Kudayberdiyev, 1991; Sydykov, 2012).

The existential essence of the Kazakh philosophy is originally presented in the works of A. Qunanbayuli (1993), which is regarded as a national paragon of wisdom. His Book of Words was influenced by the assault on him during the volost governor election in Genghistau in 1898. The poet survived, the conspirators brought cattle to Abai's Qunanbayuli aul as an apology, but he returned the cattle immediately (Maytanov, 2004). In Word Nine, he wrote, "I am a Kazakh myself. Do I love Kazakhs or do I not? If I did, I would approve of their customs, I would find in their behavior the trifle that would bring me joy and consolation, allow me to enjoy some of their qualities. My hope would shine forevermore. Alas, there is no such thing. If I did not, I would not speak to them, I would not share my innermost thoughts, I would not ask for advice, I would not be part of them, I would not take interest in their affairs by asking "What are they doing? What is going on?", I would go on about my own affairs in peace or would even move away from them... Therefore, there is an emptiness in my heart. I think to myself: maybe this is for the best? I will not suffer when I die: "Alas, I have not yet been fortunate enough to experience such joy!" Without regretting the earthly things, I will comfort myself with the hope for the things yet to come" (Sydykov & Kurmanbayev, 2013).

The existence of Abai was original and unique, unlike any other experience not only due to the uniqueness of the steppe – the place where the transcendent spirit forms, but also due to the unprecedented harshness of national criticism, which may be unparalleled in world literature (Kartayeva, 2013).

Abai was not the first to discover the critical mode, which was widespread in the nomadic society. However, simple thoughts generated by an exceptionally complete spiritual vision were so powerful that notes on the customs of compatriots turned into a national manifesto. He was a nonbeliever; he conveyed the national experience through the prism of his own destiny. The power of the artistic word led to generalization. Thus, the Book of Words tells about the entire nation, rather than about Abai's existence in the world. There is an obvious contradiction in the Book of Words: Abai talks about loneliness despite the fact he was always surrounded by family and disciples. At big public meetings, Abai always met his followers. However, the writer was still lonely (Kaskabasov, 2013).

Abai excelled at understanding the heart of the matter and events during the Age of Tribulations, when the harmonious traditions were abolished and people were driven by instincts. Arguments between tribes over extensive areas happened in the Kazakh society even with tribal administration, before the introduction of Russian administration in the steppes. Arguments over grazing land sometimes happened within tribes and between auls. The tribal structure of administration was capable of handling conflicts. However, after the land was divided into volosts and the position of the volost governor was introduced, the tribal structure crumbled. The battle for the positions of volost governors commenced (Pochekeyev, 2016).

The metaphysics of Kazakhs' existence, which is encoded primarily in the oral tradition in the form of simple and clear canonic rules of nomads, is shown in the poems and philosophical prose of Shakarim (Ananyeva, 2016). By following the tradition of questioning, he asked original questions, which were also the key to the answers contained in his verses, poems, and philosophical prose (Sydykov, 2014).

Consider a famous example: in 1912, Shakarim sent a letter from Genghistau to the Aykap magazine that was published in the Kazakh language in Troitsk (Russia). The title of the letter was "Answer My Five Questions, Please". The letter was brief; the questions were simple and metaphysical.

The questions were as follows:

1. What goal did Allah pursue when he made man?
2. What is the most important thing for man in life?
3. Do you believe that bliss or suffering await man after death?
4. What is the best man like?
5. In your opinion, does humanity in man increase or fade away in time?

Whatever your answer, please give your reasoning (Sydykov & Kurmanbayev, 2013).

Reduction in metaphysics best suits an original philosophical system unencumbered with excess complexity. However, philosophy itself will return to metaphysics from time to time in order to reclaim the place of the metascience that studies not only human thinking, but also the universal laws of



development of the world. Disregard of metaphysics was created historically by G. Hegel's (1997) phenomenology of spirit, which proclaimed the replacement of metaphysics with objective logic that should raise philosophy to the rank of metascience by investigating "pure forms of thoughts", free from "special substrates" borrowed from the conceptual sphere (such "substrates" as the soul, the world, and God).

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to understand and to analyze the philosophical thinking of Shakarim as the follower of Abai's ideas.

Research questions

The overarching research question of this study was as follows:

What philosophical problems did Shakarim consider?

Method

The study used a set of historical and philosophical methods, in particular, the principles of historicism, objectivism, dialectic unity of the historical and the logical, and historical-analytical methods.

One of the crucial research methods is historicism, which allows investigating the epistemology of Abai and Shakarim with regard to the socio-historical situation in which the philosophers lived.

Special methods used in the study include the philosophical and anthropological approach to Shakarim's ideas, which showed the essence of his approach to cognitive and creative human activity.

Data, Analysis, and Results

The important thing in the "primal" and therefore trivial questions of Shakarim are the answers that his philosophy implies. While clarifying his own philosophical system, he weighed it in his poems and prose outside any social structure of spiritual development, testing even the simplest notions of epistemology. The only thing he did not doubt was that God created man. Therefore, he criticized Darwin's theory in his book *The Three Truths*: "Meaning the Maker, no reasonable mind would ever question the fact that all living things appear, exist and change according to the laws of nature. But my consciousness rejects persistent claims that all similar things originated from each other and then only changed their form. When Earth was unfit for the life of plants and animals, the solid ground and water merged with everything surrounding them. This created conditions for the emergence of plants and animals, which developed to be similar, remotely similar or entirely different, depending on the ratio of earth, water, and air. However, according to Darwin and Mendel, plants originated from each other and only changed their form subsequently. My conclusion is as follows: the truth is that everything in the world has its maker. The truth also is that everything changes, but not in a way when all similar things originate from each other and change form" (Kudayberdiev, 1991). However, Shakarim's question is deeper: why did Allah create man? (Could he not have created man?) According to him, God created man with good intent, but man sunk into vice, which implies that man is flawed.

Shakarim's second question basically asks "what is the meaning of life?". The simplest answer is "in living". However, the philosopher, being driven, like other intelligent nomads, by enlightening absolutism, set a more extensive problem. "Life is a disappearing attribute of the soul", wrote Shakarim. He believed that life depended on the soul and ceased when the soul left the body: "A soul can acquire a body, but flesh cannot create a soul". The goal of the poet is to preserve the harmony of presence. He sought the meaning of life in the canons of truth, the mind, and goodness.

Shakarim's third question hides doubt, which a believer should not show. He was interested in the question "Is there life after death?" – an existential question. Life and death, life after death – these are the ley lines of the main contradiction of metaphysics. Shakarim seemed to have established that the life of a poet was poetry. He discovered the saving form of metempsychosis – reincarnation after death in the form of poetic lines. However, he still had doubts regarding which life was true – the one we live or the one that awaits in heaven. By suppressing logical thinking, Shakarim preferred believing in life after death. He believed in reincarnation. He did not agree with rational reasoning, but did not take faith and the reasoning of idealism on trust.

How does humanity change in humans with time? – asks Shakarim. Life is full of examples of both spiritual impoverishment and the sublime. It is impossible to get rid of bad inclinations completely. According to Shakarim's terminology, the reason lies in the human nature. He was convinced of the absolute importance of spiritual values. However, he was frightened by the levelling of the cognitive function that occurred in the Kazakh society in the late nineteenth century and continued in the twentieth century. The feeling of catastrophic changes that broke the traditional order of life forced him to turn to the problem of humanity; he formulated this famous question by setting an "eternal" moral vector: the human being should develop the best qualities and strive for perfection.

Shakarim's last question is about the good, i.e. ideal human being is dictated by the existential anxiety towards the forthcoming loneliness, metaphysical concern for those who remain. According to poet, the public is "devilishly jealous and engulfed in lies". The poem titled "What Is Man?" reflects the resentment of World War I: "Think about it – all the people are blood brothers / What's the reason for their fight with one another? / Nations live in a barbarous and wild state / Why? I do refuse to even understand / Furthermore, the similar animal paths / Are trodden by enlightened Europeans". The conclusion of this phenomenological essay is obvious: the world is in a mess, because it is still sinking in its ancient nature. Therefore, it requires a paragon that could serve as a beacon. The misguided shall find forgiveness on this path, but with certain conditions: he or she should calm down passion, restrain desire, and practice modesty according to the sensual and intellectual experience of the learning and thinking steppe dweller. Such a modest and good-minded person is the "good person" that Shakarim implies.

Shakarim understood that guiding people towards the ideal was impossible using only appeals. Therefore, at the age of 54, he settled all alone in the middle of the desolate steppe to search for truth. He decided to change the world by changing himself, to make the world more perfect by making himself more perfect. He understood the contradictions of reality, but in each individual, he



saw the fundamentals that could make him or her happy. While encouraging his compatriots to move beyond ignorance, Shakarim, according to his own words, felt even worse than a beggar, since he did not find any response in the people. This was the reason why he became a hermit (Sydykov, 2012). Shakarim knew the precursors and he went to the steppes knowingly to devote himself to spiritual life. Life and death, life after death – these are the key lines of the main contradiction of metaphysics. This is what Shakarim contemplated in reclusion.

He always had incredibly high demands to himself. Nevertheless, he also had issues with humankind: “No matter how much we brag that the human being is an enlightened creature, many people even now have not gone beyond the childish or even wild state. Humans are incapable of abandoning maliciousness and living in peace and harmony as close people, without deceiving each other or stealing from each other. We thump our chests and brag about how cultural and educated we – the twentieth-century persons – are, but even now, the human body does not yet hold a pure mind. No matter how much we want to take an honest path, desire to create heaven on Earth, there are but a few people in the world who are capable of conflict-free relationships. And even those will probably not work out. Their merits will be used by some villain, like a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Until a person gets to know his soul clearly, he will not know who he is. Without knowing this, he will do harm to his kind, while in word denying evil, but not letting these words into his heart. One can say many a word, but this does not mean that the person believes. If the person believes, he does not do evil. Mullahs, priests, and other clergymen capture the common herd by preaching friendship, equality, brotherhood, and nothing more. The person will only find himself on the path of truth when he comes to know the nobleness of the soul” (Kudayberdiev, 1994).

Shakarim did not support the rapidly changing structure of the Kazakh society. He believed that the Kazakh nation is an orphan, left without the support of ancient history. His opinion of an individual was that the human being should be ready for independent steps without being guided by somebody else’s orders.

Shakarim’s works are abundant with philosophical thoughts and contemplations. His son Akhat remembered his father’s words during their last encounter: “If I had in mind my own tranquility, I would long have been rich, I would have spent my life in goodness, striving for a title of a powerful and influential person. But I was born man and I will keep the title of man! I wanted to save the thoughts and honor, to keep my own name pure; therefore, I chose solitude. I wrote not for my time, but for the people of the future. The foundation of humanity includes not only the living, but also the people of the future. Life is always renewed. If life is renewed, the human being should be cleansed. Nothing vanishes without trace – it returns, having changed. History is eternal. The new time takes everything pure and useful from history. History that was purged by fire is precious like a diamond; it should become the cornerstone of the new times. I wanted to find a broken-off part of this stone and attach it to history” (Shakarim, 2007).

Shakarim conscientiously constructed in the ontological mode a system that was new to the Kazakh philosophy, thus continuing Abai’s existential experience. He was not merely a relative of Abai, but also his disciple and follower (Sydykov, 2012). Close relations are proven by constant communication,

participation in the same family and public events, the works of the two authors, poets, and philosophers, coherent creative intentions and actions, which show the similarity of their moral, spiritual, esthetic, and ethical principles (Sydykov, 2014).

The traditional society is conservative. It treats changes with caution. The invasion into the boundaries of the national paradigm is similar to intervention. The philosophical ideas of Abai and Shakarim became the icon of traditionalism, which should be protected. The world perception of the nation was changed by the catastrophe that took place in the early 1930s, when forced collectivization in Kazakhstan, according to certain data (Abylkhozhin, Kozybayev & Tatimov, 1989), caused the death of two million Kazakhs from starvation – this was half of the entire Kazakh population at that time. Shakarim was killed by Chekists in the steppe after being accused of opposing the Soviet power. The tragedy had a lasting impact on the world perception, nature, and psyche of Kazakhs, who were forced to change their way of life and keep up the traditions of nomadism in memory only. From this perspective, the philosophical tradition of Abai and Shakarim is the ontology of the turning point in the existence in the world of nomadism, which nowadays unites historical sense with social activity.

Discussion and Conclusion

Human history knows many projects of an ideal society – from Plato's ideal republic, Thomas More's "Utopia", and Campanella's "City of the Sun" to the communist society – the unshakable ideal of communists (Levitas, 2010). However, not one of them was implemented; the goal – an ideal society – has not been reached. This is probably right, since the true ideal is unreachable, as an approximation asymptote. However, original, vivid, and interesting projects of an ideal society stimulated human thinking and gave impetus to social development. In this sense, Shakarim's project is not a naïve attempt to change the world, but an actual philosophical system, aimed at transforming the spirit. He did not agree with the assumption that the human being had nothing that could be described as a soul. August Comte (1798–1857) argued: "Without accurate physical data, let us not bother with metaphysical knowledge. Let us consider true only that which is detected by sensory organs". Comte's ideas developed into a movement called positivism. His followers argue that there is nothing that the five sensory organs are incapable of perceiving. This means that while harnessing the finest virtues of the soul – the strong mind, the free thought, they were incapable of seeing their own soul (Kudayberdiev, 1994).

Shakarim understood the main idea of August Comte, the basic thesis of "positive philosophy" – the demand not to limit oneself to describing the appearance of phenomena. Comte argued that metaphysics, as a science of the essence of phenomena, should be discarded. Shakarim, however, formulated the primal, i.e. metaphysical questions about existence and the soul. He did not agree with Comte. Apparently, this was the moment he decided to dedicate a book to this problem – this book was "The Three Truths" (Kudayberdiev, 1991). His treatise "On Being and the Soul" basically features an announcement: "The book is written about the soul that should reveal itself only to the pure mind, when it is read and investigated unbiasedly, without delving into religion or science. This requires no tools, no machinery, and no electricity. This is not something that has just come to my mind. This is a truth that was found during the search for the good that has come from humankind, when for thirty years of



thinking and searching I felt like I was digging old graves, scooping away years with a spoon, digging a well with a needle... No matter who you are, followers of August Comte, do not speak ill of religion or sharia when talking about faith. But neither should you be like the theologians or saints who are ready to accuse of heresy anyone who finds a flaw in the religion. While believing your eyes, do not be limited to just that, open the eyes of your soul!" (Kudayberdiev, 1994).

The main conclusions drawn by Shakarim are as follows:

1. God created man with good intent, but man is sinful.
2. The meaning of life lies in goodness.
3. Belief in reincarnation.
4. Humans should improve themselves.
5. Humans should be modest and good-minded.

According to Shakarim, by following these principles, it is possible to develop a harmonious person.

Implications and Recommendations

Modern philosophy, based on the spiritual experience of humankind, using reflection to take it into the age of rapid development of natural sciences, has such a vast potential that the emergence of new original philosophical systems seems archaic and impossible. Furthermore, the categorical framework of philosophy is becoming more developed and specialized, which expands (and complicates) the structure of cognition. Philosophy does not address the fundamental problems that mediate "eternal" questions. Meanwhile, the questions of presence-in-the-world still emerge during cognition; neophytes do not limit themselves to historical experience and expect answers of philosophers. Philosophers of the past, who were not overloaded with the problems of special sciences, could, like Shakarim, contemplate fundamentals without being afraid of philosophical loneliness or being called metaphysicians. Pure ideas and systems were created in complete reclusion.

Philosophical traditions are of interest within the framework of international discourse. Therefore, it is necessary not only to adhere to modern western philosophical systems, but also to develop the national philosophical thinking, as in the times of Shakarim, in an original system.

Disclosure statement

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