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ALEXANDER V. SURMAVA

Ilyenkov and the Revolution in Psychology

The article introduces Ilyenkov as an original psychologist, who, based on his Marxist reading of Spinoza, provides a novel solution to the psychophysical problem. Rejecting Pavlov's stimulus-reaction theory, he argues for the unifying concept of "thinking body," which allows him to explain thinking as a mode of the corporeal action in accordance with the universal forms of the world of objects. This understanding transforms psychology from purely magic discipline into scientific theory, which has a solid practical foundation.

As is well known, the twentieth century was rich in prominent psychologists, but we shall not find the name of E.V. Ilyenkov in any dictionary or encyclopedia of psychology. Indeed, even people who knew him well and esteemed him did not count him as a psychologist, although they recognized his contribution to theoretical psychology.

To mark his friend's eightieth anniversary, V.V. Davydov* wrote an article titled: "The Contribution of E.V. Ilyenkov to Theoretical Psychology." The article begins with these words:

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Alexander Vladimirovich Surmava, candidate of psychological sciences, is a docent in the Department of the Theory and History of Psychology at the Vygotsky Institute of Psychology, Russian State University for the Humanities.

Translated by Stephen D. Shenfield.

*Here the author refers to a Soviet psychologist and pedagogue, Vasilii Vasil'evich Davydov (1930–1998). The follower of Lev Vygotsky and a pupil

The well-known Russian philosopher Eval'd Vasil'evich Ilyenkov (1924–1979) did a great deal in such disciplines as dialectical logic, the history of philosophy, and esthetics. At the same time, he also examined in his works certain fundamental problems of theoretical psychology (the nature of the ideal and of consciousness, of imagination and thought, personality and individuality, etc.) and looked for ways of solving them by means of the philosophical analysis of psychological material.¹

Further on, Davydov quite rightly notes that Ilyenkov was familiar not only “with the main works of L.S. Vygotsky” but also with leading Russian psychologists who were pupils of Vygotsky, that he took part in “psychology conferences and seminars,” and that he “devoted great attention to theoretical questions of educational psychology.” Davydov sums up as follows: “The main thing is that he provided a deep logical-philosophical foundation for the basic propositions of cultural-historical theory and of Vygotsky’s theory of developmental teaching.”

Everything here is absolutely indisputable except for the conclusion. Ilyenkov’s theoretical ideas are not always consistent with the set of ideas that goes by the name of “cultural-historical theory.” Here, strictly speaking, it is necessary to note two fundamental points: first, that this set of ideas can hardly lay claim to the status of a scientific theory in terms of the criterion for such status that both thinkers—that is, both Ilyenkov and Vygotsky himself—shared; and, second, that Ilyenkov’s works do not contain any analysis of Vygotsky’s theoretical ideas. Even the name of Vygotsky is mentioned by Ilyenkov only a handful of times.

What is the reason for this reticence?

Let us first enumerate what the two thinkers have in common. Above all, they are both sincere Marxists, and the shared dream of a truly free, well-roundedly developed human being is probably the

of Daniil Elkonin and Petr Galperin, he is credited with the development of pedagogical psychology as a separate and unique brunch of psychology. He was very close to Ilyenkov, Zinov'ev, and Schedrovitskii, with whom he actively elaborated in his work on psychology of teaching and cognitive development of children.—Ed.

main thing that makes them theoretical allies. They are also at one in recognizing the social, cultural-historical nature of the human psyche, in their antinaturalism. Finally, they have the same dialectical approach: both hold that the method of Marx's *Capital* is the sole correct scientific method, enabling the investigator to move beyond blind empiricism and construct a truly monistic theory. Hence too their search for an abstract "cell" whose theoretical analysis alone makes it possible to reproduce in theory the entire concrete wealth of the object under study—in the given case, the human personality.

They also have in common an understanding of psychology not as a positivistic empirical science but as a truly theoretical science that stands firmly on both feet on a professional philosophical foundation and correlates its theoretical concepts not with the "practice" of the psychotherapeutic couch—a practice artificially constructed by psychologists themselves for purposes not entirely devoid of self-interest—but with "highly organized practice—industrial, educational, political, military."²

In the latter connection, it is also worth noting that the two theorists obviously share a rejection of the numerous schools and sects of "fashionable" idealist philosophy like the "philosophy of life," phenomenology, and emergentism. Vygotsky, like Ilyenkov, stands wholly on the ground of classical philosophy. The main pathos of Vygotsky's research was its conscious orientation toward the classics of philosophy and psychology, which the positivistically oriented empirical psychology of Wundt and Titchener deliberately ignores. From his point of view—and in this he and Ilyenkov are unconditional allies—the history of psychology must be reckoned at least from Socrates, and this means that the psychological classics begin not with the experiments to measure reaction time but with the Socratic dialogues. For this reason, incidentally, Elkonin's now fashionable characterization of Vygotsky as a *nonclassical* psychologist seems not just a misunderstanding but a serious theoretical error that distorts and emasculates Vygotsky's true position, an error that belittles him as a theorist.

The list of points on which the positions of Vygotsky and Ilyenkov coincide could be extended. Thus, I have not mentioned one

striking, almost mystical resonance between the two thinkers: each of them left behind after his death an unfinished manuscript titled “Spinoza” in which he did not manage to get as far as an analysis of the theoretical ideas of Spinoza himself but halted at the critique of Cartesianism. At this point, however, it is time to shift our focus from the similarities between the two thinkers to their differences. Indeed, in his manuscript “Spinoza,” Ilyenkov did not write a chapter devoted to Spinoza’s theoretical ideas, but he did leave us the first two chapters of his “Dialectical Logic” [Dialekticheskaiia logika], in which he formulates the idea of the thinking body, which certainly goes back to Spinoza and just as certainly is his own idea.

By contrast, in his “Doctrine Concerning the Emotions” [Uchenie ob emotsiiaikh] Vygotsky only promises to move on from the critique of Cartesianism to a positive, properly Spinozan vision of the theoretical problems that he has discussed. But, alas, he does not make good on his promise. The manuscript breaks off literally in the middle of a sentence, so that we do not find out Vygotsky’s version of a Spinozan solution to the same psychophysical problem. True, there remains a slight hope in connection with the awaited publication of Vygotsky’s scientific diaries. Did he perhaps, in brief notes “for himself” in small notebooks, on cards in library catalogues, on the back of scrap paper, or of course in the margins of his “Ethics” [Etika], leave us at least a hint of how he envisioned a Spinozan solution to the psychophysical problem?

The initial publication of two fragments of these diaries gave cause for hope and was at the same time a disappointment. The diaries contain a number of brilliant aphorisms that confirm how intensely Vygotsky was thinking about a Spinozan escape from the theoretical dead end of Cartesianism—aphorisms to which Ilyenkov might have been pleased to sign his name. Here are a few:

The central problem of all psychology is freedom.

Bring Spinozism to life in Marxist psychology.

From the great creations of Spinoza, as from distant stars, light takes several centuries to reach us. Only the psychology of the future will be able to realize the ideas of Spinoza.³

However, the fragment devoted to the psychophysical problem

as such does not convey the impression that Vygotsky had any developed conception of how to get out of the Cartesian dead end. His main positive idea is that the key to solving the riddle must be sought in the relationship between thinking and speech and that the content of the psychophysical problem is therefore fundamentally different for man and for animals. He writes: “The *whole psychophysical problem*, like all other problems, in animal psychology appears in a quite different mutual relation and in a different cross section, that is, *differently* from how it appears in human psychology. From ignorance of *this flow all* the errors of animal psychology.”

Vygotsky proposes a solution that has a clearly articulated semi-otic character. It seems to him that an unfree, essentially mechanical puppet acquires freedom through overcoming natural determination (the $S \rightarrow R$ reaction, the mechanical triggering of a response by an external stimulus) in the act of mediation by a cultural sign—in the general case, by the word. Here he understands the word unambiguously as an arbitrary, conventional sign (see, for example: “Tool and Sign in the Development of the Child” [Orudie i znak v razvitii rebenka]). Hence the wordless animal is excluded from his schema for the overcoming of psychophysical dualism. Vygotsky promises some sort of special solution for animal psychology, but does not tell us what it is.

It is not enough to say that Ilyenkov does not agree with Vygotsky on this point. He disagrees with him in the most radical fashion. The attempt at a semiotic solution to the psychophysical problem is not simply unacceptable to Ilyenkov: it contradicts his basic theoretical principles as a Marxist and a Spinozist. However, it equally contradicts the basic theoretical principles of Vygotsky himself. The contradiction, of course, lies not in its incompatibility with any “ideological principles” of Marxism but in its incompatibility with logic and elementary scientific principles. Let us not neglect to recall that for Vygotsky “the matter should stand as follows: our science will become Marxist to the extent that it becomes true, scientific; and we shall work precisely on making it true science, and not on bringing it into accord with the theory of Marx.”⁴

To us today, reading Vygotsky's texts from the higher vantage point of Ilyenkov's "Dialectical Logic," it is quite obvious that no signs are capable of bridging the chasm between two Cartesian substances. Let us recall that the sign first appears in Vygotsky for the purpose of helping to destroy the mechanical determinism of the $S \rightarrow R$ reaction, which was and remains the basis of practically the whole of biology and physiology.⁵ Vygotsky needs to destroy this determinism in order to give the subject a chance to acquire freedom of reaction.⁶

It is understandable that if a mechanical stimulus–reaction puppet were a self-conscious subject it would suffer greatly from having no "freedom of reaction" and being forced to submit to an alien will—the will of the repulsive authority of the puppeteer's hands. And then it might use some sort of secret sign, thought up by itself, as a reminder that besides the puppeteer's stimuli it also has a higher, spiritual destiny as a subject, and, contemplating this sign, rise up against authority with its stimuli, so pitiful in the light of high spirituality.

Alas, all this poetic delirium is based on the quite unreal premise that a mechanical stimulus–reaction puppet can be a subject, that "a person uses the natural properties of his brain tissue and masters the processes taking place inside it."⁷ There is an obvious logical error here. If "a person" is something standing above the processes taking place in his brain and body, then perhaps somehow he is capable of mastering the processes taking place there, but in that case we happily return to classical Cartesianism, and therefore also to the difficulties revealed by René Descartes in his analysis. Then, in order to answer the question of how a person's incorporeal-spiritual essence can change the course of his corporeal processes, we shall have to think up a second version of the telekinetically activated "cone-shaped gland," something like the "Eccles's demon" that resides in a synaptic gap.⁸

Conversely, if the nature of man is wholly corporeal—which is not impossible, for according to an idea of Spinoza that was a favorite of Vygotsky "no one has yet determined of what the body is capable"⁹—then "a person," according to the proposition of Vy-

gotsky cited above, *is* these very “brain processes,” and therefore he is in principle incapable of mastering them for the simple reason that he wholly coincides with them. Then, at best, one set of brain processes masters another set of brain processes, one $S \rightarrow R$ determinism is subordinated to another $S \rightarrow R$ determinism, but it is not hard to understand that this cannot lead to liberation from $S \rightarrow R$ determinism as such or to any sort of “freedom of reaction.”

Both Vygotsky and Ilyenkov clearly realized that the key to a new and truly scientific psychology lies in an approach that rationally overcomes the psychophysical dualism that has pervaded the whole of psychology. But in tackling this problem they follow different paths. Vygotsky, as I have noted, proposes a semiotic “solution” to the psychophysical problem, and this means that objectively, against his will, he goes in a direction opposite to Spinoza in this question. Ilyenkov, by contrast, goes precisely toward Spinoza. In “Dialectical Logic” he articulates his own fundamentally new reading of Spinoza and on this basis proposes a truly revolutionary escape from the dead end of the psychophysical problem. This escape is built on the concept of “the thinking body”—that same body whose capabilities “no one has yet determined,”¹⁰ the body whose corporeal action in accordance with the universal forms of the world of objects *is* thinking as such.

At the beginning of the last century, when Vygotsky lived and worked, the nature of the human body was associated not with the Ilyenkov–Spinoza idea of a *thinking* body but with Pavlov’s conception of the body as a stimulus–reaction reflex machine. This conception held undivided sway over physiology and biology. In the second half of the century, the situation began to change through the efforts of the great Russian physiologist N.A. Bernstein,* but each step in this direction still required enormous courage and enormous effort. Ilyenkov made a significant contribution to the overcoming of the stimulus–reaction paradigm, which by this time had exhausted its heuristic potential and become an obstacle to the development of scientific thought.

*For more on Bernstein’s physiology, see *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, vol. 44, no. 2, March–April 2006.—Trans.

Ilyenkov and Pavlov

Today, when the popularity of Vygotsky abroad is simply incredible, it is hard to believe that not long ago the only name that foreign researchers associated with Russian (Soviet) psychology was that of Ivan Petrovich Pavlov. And, indeed, the intellectual history of Russia, for good or for ill, is inseparable from this name. Without a doubt, Pavlov was one of the major Russian scientists of the last century, a scientist of truly world renown: suffice it to say that his name stands first on the list of Russian Nobel laureates.

The international authority of this scientist was so great that even Stalin had to tolerate Pavlov's statements about the Soviet system, which were unprecedentedly bold for those times. However, Stalin, for whom such tolerance was an intolerable imposition, took subtle revenge on the great scientist after his death by organizing in 1950 the "Pavlov session" of the two academies* and making the name of the great physiologist into one of the symbols of his regime.

The "historical [Pavlov] session" was a pogrom not only for physiology but also for psychology. After the resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Russia Communist Party (Bolsheviks) "On Pedological Distortions in the System of People's Commissariat of Education" [on 4 July 1936—Trans.] it became the second nail driven by the authorities into the coffin of our psychology. From that time on, the few Soviet psychologists were not only forbidden to rely on the works of Vygotsky—the person who had taken the first real step toward the creation of a new Marxist psychology—but also ordered "organically to master Pavlov's doctrine of higher nervous activity as the natural-science foundation [of psychology]."¹¹

Ilyenkov was a contemporary of this event: in 1950 he was a graduate student at Moscow State University, in the Department of the History of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy. We may safely assume that the party organization in his department, as in all others, did not neglect to hold a discussion of the "guiding instructions" of this session. Traces of these discussions are easily found in Ilyenkov's latest works.

*Those two academies were the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the Soviet Academy of Medical Sciences.—Trans.

In the clearest possible fashion, Ilyenkov demonstrates that in moving back and forth between the poles of the abstract Cartesian alternative—the mechanical, spatially extended body versus the disembodied soul—we do not distance ourselves even by a single step from the dead-end Cartesian logic as such. In this sense, Ilyenkov’s critique is aimed not only at the obvious target of Pavlovian abstract mechanicism but also at its reverse side, the no less flagrant abstract spiritualism of his present-day critics.

If the animal and human body is just a senseless mechanism, then it is impossible to explain the obvious—albeit perhaps denied in words—meaningfulness of its behavior, which is obviously irreducible to the play of abstract chance, to blind trial and error, without appealing to some incorporeal principle, to something like a *vis viva*—or “soul”—or, should the worst come to the worst, to the “reflex of freedom” or to teleological determination. Of course, all this has nothing to do with either “natural-scientific” or any other materialism, and therefore easily coexists with the idea of God, both in the dualistic philosophy of Descartes and in the minds of his latter-day adepts.

In the debate between Pavlovian physiologists and some of the reckless opponents of the Pavlovian school, Ilyenkov with good reason saw a parallel with the dispute that took place three hundred years ago between Spinoza and Descartes. He writes:

Analysis of the views of contemporary physiologists of higher nervous activity, and especially of brain physiologists influenced by cybernetics, shows quite clearly that thinking in this field, which guides both experimentation and the collection of facts, turns on the same problem that Spinoza was forced to tackle in his dispute with Descartes, and that most physiologists fail to find a way out of the difficulties of the “psychophysiological problem” precisely because they are still unable to escape from the clutches of Cartesian dualism, because they cannot see the path that Spinoza saw and outlined with the utmost clarity.

True, Cartesian dualism circulates among them not in its original form but in the form given it by neo-Kantianism, on the one hand, and by I.P. Pavlov, on the other. The same Pavlov who placed a bust of Descartes in the garden of his institute and never had a good word to say about Spinoza.¹²

Returning to Cartesian dualism in its classical “original form”

enables Ilyenkov to kill two birds with one stone. First, it enables him to demarcate the real problem—a problem usually hidden under eclectic accretions of empiricist science—in its most general theoretical form. Second, it enables him, after accomplishing this task and presenting the problem as a logical contradiction within classical theoretical culture, to pave a path toward its productive resolution.

What, following Ilyenkov, are we ourselves able to say about interaction between physiological and psychic processes? Nothing! For there is nothing here to interact. The psyche does not exist separately, in abstraction from the living animal or human organism, in abstraction from the physiology of the latter. They are therefore no more able to “interact” than are “circularity” and “triangularity” in a real corporeal cone, or “frontness” and “profileness” in a human face.

To this may be raised the reasonable objection that in exactly the same way it is meaningless to look for a relationship between a psychic image and a physical mode of action of a subject in the world of objects. That, of course, is so. . . . And yet not entirely so.

The classical psychophysical problem, of course, *also* has no solution, like the psychophysiological problem, if in its analysis we do not go beyond superficial metaphors. But if we shift from metaphors to theoretical analysis proper, then we discover that the psychophysical problem leads us to Spinozism (as its substantive negation) while the “psychophysiological problem” leads us nowhere.

The psychophysical problem, by dealing with the relationship between a psychic image and the image of the action of the subject of this image in the world of objects, poses a real task akin to that which arose in the course of the evolution of living and mobile beings that needed orientation in the objective world. How is an animal to orient itself in a world from which it is physically separated but with which it vitally needs to be constantly reunited? That is a real problem; the solution to it was first found in the history of evolution by nature and then guessed at in general theoretical terms by Spinoza.

It is empirically obvious that we, as beings endowed with a

psyche, owe the success of our action in this world, which bears no resemblance to a meaningless succession of trials and errors, to our possession of a sort of map or picture of the external world, its psychic image. At the same time, it is clear to us that the world itself and its psychic image are not the same thing. We have only to press a finger against our own eye to see how the picture of the world bends and splits in two. We, of course, “guess”—and a pledge of this is the experience of other people in the here and now—that the world itself is neither bent nor split in two by a wave of our finger. As for our inclination to trust in the experience of those around us, our trustfulness is based on the point that we are united with other people not only by the experience of shared contemplation and conversation but also by shared *practical* experience, which would be quite impossible if we did not have similar and practically reliable images of the objects and circumstances of our shared practical activity. Thus, if one of the participants in a duel relies on an adequate psychic image of his rapier while his opponent relies on a distorted, illusory image of the same blade, it is not at all difficult to predict how the duel will end.

Thus, the psychophysical problem arises before the investigator when he tries to tackle a real difficulty: how can an imagined psychic image, this virtual picture that exists in some unknown space, mediate—not in the imagination but *in reality*—the action of an animal or person in the world of sensations and objects? By reflecting on this real problem, we may arrive at a real—albeit not a simple—truth: the only possible way out of the Cartesian dead end is Spinoza’s conception of the psychophysical identity as an identity of opposites. The image should not be correlated with a real sensory object, because it unfolds from the start in sensory space as the image of an action of the thinking—that is, acting in a manner adequate to its object—body. The image of an object is not separated from it and does not exist in the neurophysiological space of the brain or in the virtual phenomenological space of the “imagination.” The image exists in a fully real space. For a tactile or haptic image this is directly obvious; for an image that the subject constructs with the aid of distant sensory organs, this was demonstrated in the course of numerous investigations of

“perceptive actions” by A.N. Leontev and A.V. Zaporozhets.¹³

Conversely, when we investigate, theoretically and experimentally, how the psychic image “interacts” with a biological current running along the nerve and how—without expending physical energy, for where would an image get energy from?—it can change the direction or magnitude of this biological current, we are engaging in theoretical and experimental magic in the most literal and exact sense of this word.

Yes, psychic and mental activity in an organism that is to any extent developed is hardly feasible without neurophysiological processes taking place within it. But such activity is also hardly feasible in the absence of muscular processes or without normal functioning of the heart and blood vessels, the liver and kidneys, the intestines and bowels, the secretory glands, and so on. In that case, we shall have to study not only how the psyche interacts with processes in the nerves but also how it directly “interacts” with peristalsis in the digestive tract. And indeed, this will be a much more meaningful example, for the digestive tract performs an albeit primitive but truly *object-oriented* function in the animal organism, so its activity really does correlate with some object-oriented image. This can in no way be said of the activity of an abstract nervous system, let alone of an arbitrary fragment thereof.

It reminds me of Ilyenkov’s example of the legs and walking in “Dialectical Logic.” The legs cannot interact with walking, because walking is none other than these same legs, taken at the moment of performing their specific function—walking. The legs *are* walking; taken in abstraction from walking, they cease to be legs and become useless outgrowths on the body of the living being.

Neurophysiological processes—provided, of course, that they are the neurophysiological processes of a healthy organism—are in general insubstantial. This means that they do not bear within themselves any logic specific to their own functioning. What command the brain will transmit in response to some external influence depends not on the brain but on the object-oriented task facing the organism as a whole. The less the brain contributes to the solution of the task “from itself,” the better for the organism. It is a matter of profound indifference to the organism what sort of “signs”

or “codes” its nervous system will use to code one or another “influence”—the color of grass, let us say. What is important to the organism, if it feeds on grass, is not to confuse grass with something inedible,¹⁴ and this is determined not by an abstract color but also by a specific smell, form, arrangement in space, taste, and so on—that is, by the *entire* totality of its object-oriented characteristics. The success (and therefore also freedom) of such activity will be conditioned least of all by the way in which the nervous system codes all this purely technical information.

Ilyenkov and Bernstein

Proceeding to analyze the theoretical position of another great physiologist of the last century, Nikolai Aleksandrovich Bernstein, let me say immediately that we do not know whether Ilyenkov was acquainted with his works. But the psychological ideas of Ilyenkov cannot be discussed without mentioning Bernstein’s name. Why will become clear from what follows.

To start with, Bernstein, like Ilyenkov, is not a Cartesian but a Spinozist. This in itself is almost unique for a twentieth-century physiologist. Hence it is understandable that they should both reject the theoretical positions of Pavlov. But the two theorists are at one not only in their critical attitude toward Pavlov’s stimulus–reaction theory, but also in their vision of where to look for a way out of the Cartesian dead ends specific to the latter. They are at one in their antisemiotic, object-oriented pathos. It is not by chance that the main theme of Bernstein’s research was study of the *object-oriented* movements of living beings—of their movements, as Ilyenkov would say, “around the form of the object.”

Bernstein establishes that real object-oriented action cannot be organized on the basis of the Descartes–Pavlov schema of a closed reflex arc, in which some external influence on the organism, a stimulus or signal, acts as a sign that triggers one or another reaction. Only extremely primitive actions, like jerking back a paw from a source of pain or blinking in response to irritation of the cornea, can be carried out in accordance with this schema, while *object-oriented*¹⁵ actions (which constitute the absolute, overwhelming

majority in the life activity of a living being, for in order to live both animals and people are compelled constantly to tackle object-oriented motor tasks) require for their organization not a set of conventional signs–signals but objectively true information about the nature and “form” of their object.

In other words, if a movement is not a mechanical reaction to a command–stimulus but an *object-oriented* movement, a movement that correlates the subject with some objective, object-oriented reality, then its organization requires not a system of conventional signals but nonconventional or, to use Bernstein’s expression, *objectively true* information.

In the course of ontogenesis, each encounter of a separate individual with the surrounding world that sets before that individual a motor task requiring solution contributes, sometimes at a very dear price, to the working out in its nervous system of an increasingly true and exact *objective reflection* of the external world—in the perception and interpretation of the situation that prompts action, in the design of an action adequate to this situation, and in the exercise of control over the implementation of the action. On the one hand, each purposeful motor operation of necessity requires not a conventionally coded but an objective, quantitatively and qualitatively true representation of the surrounding world in the brain. On the other hand, each such operation is itself an active tool for the acquisition of correct knowledge of this surrounding world. Success or failure in solving each actively experienced motor task leads to progressive polishing and cross-checking of the evidence of the aforementioned sensory syntheses and of their components, and also to knowing through action, *verification through practice*, which is the cornerstone of the entire dialectical-materialist theory of knowledge and in the case under investigation serves as a sort of biological context for the Leninist theory of reflection.¹⁶

It is of the greatest interest to look at the passage just quoted from the theoretical position of Ilyenkov, for it contains the genesis of an idea—and no ordinary idea. On the one hand, Bernstein says, in a fashion traditional and appropriate for a physiologist, that objective reflection of the external world occurs, is literally *worked out* in the nervous system, that the surrounding world is represented “in the brain.” But in the brain tissue, as he himself has just cogently explained, there is and can be nothing except wholly

conventional codes and processes for their successive recoding from one set of conventional codes into another. In short, we shall find in the brain not an object-oriented but a semiotic process. But the point is that Bernstein does not confine himself to this assertion but advances a formula that may well serve “as a sort of biological context” not only for “the Leninist theory of reflection” but also for the Ilyenkov–Spinoza understanding of the nature of thinking—a huge step forward in the concretization of the aforementioned general philosophical principle. “*Knowing through action*”—this is Bernstein’s revolutionary formula. He links it with a comma to the expression “*verification through practice*,” but while the latter expression is simply a quotation from Lenin the former belongs 100 percent to Bernstein.

Bernstein’s own thought does not repeat the old Marxist thesis about the role of practice in knowing, but contains a fundamentally new idea. The formulas “*knowing through action*” and “*verification of knowing through practice*” closely resemble one another, but do not coincide. “Action” obviously refers to individual action, while practice is obviously a social category. It is equally obvious that sociohistorical practice is not something fundamentally opposed to and mystically elevated above individual actions, but in the final analysis is nothing other than the historical sum of the actions of separate individuals.

Of course, individual action or individual experience, like the single experiment, is poorly suited to the role of a philosophical criterion of truth. Such individual experience contains too much abstract chance and subjective caprice. But the point is that even when generalized by historical practice, which successfully removes the veneer of chance and subjectivity from individual experience, socio-historical experience still remains the same *individual* experience, but in its *universal* form, purged of all extraneous elements.

It is obvious that when, following Spinoza, Ilyenkov speaks of thinking as a mode of action of the thinking body, he too has in mind not the single and random stirring of the subject, even if it does coincide here and now with the geometric contour of the thing that confronts him, but the very principle of such motion, the object-oriented relation itself, the object-oriented action in its universal

sense. Fundamentally, the physiologist—and in essence already psychologist—Bernstein approaches the same understanding of the process of knowing from his own angle, through the analysis of corporeality—that same corporeality that, in Spinoza’s opinion, conceals within itself much unexpected potential.

Of course, this understanding of the psyche and thinking did not emerge all of a sudden. To say nothing of Spinoza, we can find approaches to it—some of them very profound and interesting—in the works of I.M. Sechenov and A.N. Severtsov, W. Köhler, K. Koffka, Vygotsky, and Leontev. At the same time, it is necessary to be clearly aware that only Ilyenkov formulated it in a theoretically complete form. It is one thing to say that the correspondence of our thinking and our psychic images to material reality is only *verified* through practice. (This still permits us to understand thinking itself as spiritualistically as we please, as some sort of purely phenomenal psychic process or, let us say, as a semiotic process, as the formal manipulation of conventional signs.) It is another matter to say that thinking is none other than a mode of action of the thinking body, that thinking is not a precondition of “intelligent” action that takes into account the nature and form of its object, *but is itself intelligent action congruent with the real corporeal form of some other body*—the object of thinking. With his formula “*knowing through action*,” Bernstein came very close to the Ilyenkov–Spinoza formula: “*knowing by action*,” or “*self-knowing action*.” Even though he did not take the final half-step to the idea of the “thinking body,” Bernstein laid the foundations of a new scientific field at the intersection of physiology and psychology,¹⁷ having in fact started to study the physiology of the *object-wise active (thinking) body*.

Ilyenkov was not a speculative philosopher in the literary-post-modernist style; he was a researcher, studying an object in all its empirical and theoretical concreteness. When he met A.I. Meshcheriakov and became acquainted with his work with deaf-blind children, he was happy to recognize him as a fellow-thinker in a common cause, and the man-made miracle of the birth of consciousness in the deaf-blind pupils of Zagorsk as empirical confirmation of his own philosophical-theoretical ideas. I do not doubt for a second that

if Ilyenkov had had occasion to make Bernstein's acquaintance and read his works he would have found in him a very close ally—just as he found an ally in Alexei Nikolaevich Leontev.

Ilyenkov and Leontev

I shall not venture to judge whether Ilyenkov was bound to Leontev by ties of friendship, as he was to P.Ia. Galperin, another prominent psychologist of the same culture–activity school, but there is no doubt that the two scientists regarded one another with great interest and great respect. Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise, considering how close were the theoretical convictions of Leontev and Ilyenkov. Ilyenkov cites Leontev's name repeatedly in his texts, although here too he shows his characteristic reticence, avoiding any substantive polemic. Ilyenkov's manner of placing emphasis on positive exposition and not naming his opponents is very reminiscent of the manner of his favorite author—Spinoza.

Obviously, one of the points that more than anything else linked the two thinkers was their understanding of the act of psychic perception as motion around the form of the object. In Leontev's theory, this understanding was developed through a system of investigations of so-called perceptive actions. The very formula: "activity, plastically assimilating" (to the form of the object) became a symbol of the closeness of the two theorists. This was repeatedly and insistently emphasized by Davydov, who tried to create a theoretical synthesis of the ideas of Leontev and Ilyenkov.

Here too, however, we encounter a riddle. True, this riddle concerns not Ilyenkov but Leontev. To me it is quite obvious that Leontev's principle of plastic assimilation goes back theoretically to Spinoza. And yet Leontev—whose philosophical-theoretical competence is not to be doubted—does not simply keep silent about this point, but contrives *not once* to mention Spinoza in his works. This is especially striking in contrast to the enthusiasm for Spinoza shown by Vygotsky and Ilyenkov, whose thinking is not alien to that of Leontev.

However, the difference between the theoretical positions of Leontev and Ilyenkov does not, of course, consist in the number of

references they make to Spinoza. The two very close thinkers are divided by their divergent understanding of the central category of dialectical psychology—the category of object-oriented activity.

Let us turn to the last works of Leontev.

When we speak of activity, we mean, following Marxist tradition, *object-oriented* activity, whose basic and initial form is sensual, directly practical activity. As regards internal, mental activity, it is a *derivative* of external activity and retains the latter's general structure and function of generating the psychic reflection of reality.¹⁸

Let us start with the point that for Leontev—as we see from the definition quoted above, which is not specific to this particular work—there are not one but two kinds of activity, one external and the other internal. Both external and internal activity are object-oriented, but—understandably—object-oriented in a somewhat different sense. External activity deals with the object directly, while internal activity, it must be supposed, deals with an image of the object, with an imagined object.

In general, the very terms “external” and “internal” as applied to activity are quite ambiguous. “External” may be understood as superficial or unimportant. And although Leontev does all he can to insist that external activity plays not simply an important but a central role in the process of generating the psychic reflection of reality, it would be desirable also to prove this. On the other hand, the term “internal” involuntarily suggests the idea of neurophysiological “activity”—that is, of processes taking place in the brain. However, Leontev vehemently and rightly insists that to drive consciousness under the lid of the skull is “to drive it into the grave. There is no way out there, from under this lid of the skull.”¹⁹

And so the “initial form” of activity is sensual-practical activity. This is an obvious assertion for any materialist. The theoretical difficulties begin later, at the next stage of the argument, when the focus shifts from “external” to “internal” activity. There arises the question: what, properly speaking, is this “internal” activity, according to Leontev? We seem to have learned that it is not activity of the brain, not physiological activity—although here too Leontev, for all the pathos of his rejection of physiology as the substratum

of the psyche and consciousness, is not fully consistent. Thus, Leontev declares: "I take the view that excluding the third link—that is, looking at [a direct relationship between] the thing (that which is reflected) and the brain (that which reflects)—is impossible on account of methodological considerations."²⁰ Properly speaking, he asserts here the impossibility of *direct* reflection—that is, the need to introduce a mediating link in the form of activity. But at the same time the assumption that reflection takes place precisely in the brain is taken as self-evident.

Such an approach is obviously contradictory. If psychic reflection takes place precisely *in the brain*, then it can be none other than some sort of physiological process, for there is simply nothing else in the brain. Let us not again look there for a cone-shaped gland with a soul. Strictly speaking, we cannot conjecture even a phenomenal psyche "in the brain," because if we admit the existence of such a thing then, strictly according to the *logic* of Descartes, it cannot possess spatial localization, so it is equally futile to place it in the brain, in the heart, or in the heels. Indeed, Leontev himself tirelessly assures us "that external and internal activity do not stand opposed to one another: one as belonging to the world of spatial extension, the other as belonging to the world of thinking."²¹

Leontev calls internal, properly psychic activity a *derivative* [*derivat*] of external activity. But what does this strange foreign word actually mean? Nothing special. In chemistry this term usually refers to some product that is derived from another. So "internal activity," being a *derivative* of sensual "external activity," is simply doomed likewise to be sensual activity, albeit hidden from the eyes of outsiders. But inasmuch as in the brain, as a sensual object, no other sensual processes, apart from physiological processes, take place, we have no choice but to return to the position that "internal activity" is physiological activity—that is, drive the psyche and consciousness back "into the grave."

However, let us try to view the matter from another angle. Let us suppose that "internal activity" is not sensual activity. But what is it then? The same "spiritual" process known from of old? A phenomenal psyche? Pure subjectivity, unburdened by any objectivity or sensuality? A mode of the Cartesian unextended substance? But

Leontev categorically rejects any such interpretation of his “internal activity.” What does he tell us about it in positive terms? That it is a form of existence of “psychic reflection.”

Leontev explains: “The development of activity leads of necessity to the rise of the psychic reflection of reality in the course of evolution, and this thesis does not stand in need of commentary. This is a quite banal proposition, which says roughly what is quoted in this form: ‘Life gives birth to the brain. In the human brain nature is reflected’ and so forth—that is, *life gives birth to reflection*.”²²

However, this explanation confuses more than it explains. If the “development” of activity—sensual-practical activity, we must suppose—*leads to* the rise of psychic reflection, then this reflection arises not immediately but only at a certain stage of this development. But this means that at the first stage *activity* already exists, while (psychic) reflection does not yet exist. In that case, in what respect does this activity differ from simple mechanical functioning, and by means of what kind of miraculous emergence does it then suddenly give birth to this reflection?

“Life gives birth to the brain.” Then we can imagine *the brain* being born out of the sea foam, as on the canvases of Salvador Dali. . . . And again riddles: “In the human brain nature is reflected.” It is reflected, to be sure; Descartes already guessed as much. The whole question is how such reflection is technically possible and what psychic reflection represents as such. And does it occur in the brain? And, by the way, does there exist some other kind of reflection besides the psychic kind? Or are these simply synonyms: we say reflection and understand the psyche, and vice versa? Finally, “*life gives birth to reflection*”! Here I myself would insert italics if Leontev himself had not done so for me—and were it not for the expression “gives birth” [*porozhdaet*]. Thus, yet again, it turns out that *before* life reflection did not exist, then in a dead mechanical world from the finger of God was born life, and from life, as from Adam’s rib, was born psychic reflection.

Leontev, unfortunately, leaves all these questions unanswered. However, let us give him a big thank you for the questions—and for the courageous admission (not often made by theorists) that he does not have answers to these crucial questions. Here it is:

I posed an alternative. It is from this point of view that I now want to look at things. I see in this position, which I now conditionally hold, a number of major problems that I personally am unable to solve. However much I try to solve them, I have still found no satisfactory solution. Perhaps colleagues have this solution. I do not. What are the problems that I cannot solve? The first problem that I cannot solve and that I see distinctly is that if we adopt this position then activity is again cut in two. Internal activity belongs wholly to psychology, as it did in the Cartesian articulation. Internal activity is “what must be rendered unto God”; as for external, especially practical, activity, it is not psychological and must be rendered unto Caesar, it is Caesar’s. Only it is not known unto which Caesar or who this Caesar is. And so we end up with a zone of no man’s land, a no man’s zone. You can render this activity unto whomever you please, but no one will take this external activity. Later I shall prove that no one takes it. This external activity, as it is described, remains without a Caesar. There is no Caesar unto whom it can be rendered. It is no man’s land. The second problem is that some links of a single activity turn out to belong to psychology, while others are outside it.²³

And so at the end of his life, already the world-renowned author of the “psychological theory of activity,” Leontev in fact admits that the theoretical approach proposed by him cannot provide a solution to the psychophysical problem—the most fundamental problem of theoretical psychology. For the question of *how* external sensual activity connects (or does not connect) with proper psychological activity, or in Leontev’s terms with “internal activity,” is one more formulation of the psychophysical problem—a theoretically irreproachable formulation, let us note, unlike its many psychophysiological variants.

What could and did Ilyenkov say about this?

He said that the problem that Leontev was trying to solve is insoluble in principle, because the question was posed incorrectly from the start. It is impossible to establish the relationship between “sensual-external activity” and psychic-internal activity, because “there do not exist from the start two different and opposite objects of investigation—the body and thinking—but just *one single* object—the *thinking body* of a real living person, merely viewed from two different and even opposite aspects or vantage points.”²⁴

It should be noted that Ilyenkov himself never provides a theoretical definition of the psyche as such. He talks more and more about Spinozan “thinking,” about that thinking which is inseparable from substance (from nature, the world matter) and is the integral property, “perfection,” and attribute of the latter. It is not hard to guess that neither the “thinking” nor the “psyche” featured in psychology textbooks coincides—they simply cannot coincide—with this Ilyenkov–Spinoza definition. The psyche as such is not an attribute of nature, but is intrinsic only to some of her sufficiently developed “modes.”

Ilyenkov and psychology

Let us return to the question that we asked ourselves at the beginning of the article. Were we not getting carried away when we called Ilyenkov a psychologist? Is it not more correct to regard him as a philosopher who—let us put it this way—*took an interest* in certain problems of theoretical psychology? At most, might we not consider him a *methodologist*?

Let us try to answer this question.

“Methodologist” and “methodology”—these were very fashionable words in the 1970s. One of the most active participants in Davydov’s theoretical seminar, Georgii Petrovich Shchedrovitskii, openly called himself “The Methodologist” and lectured his numerous student followers about the approaching age of methodology. One of the participants in the seminar asked naively: “What do psychologists need a pastor–methodologist for? Would it not be more rational for theorists to construct their own methodology on the basis of classical philosophy as a *substantive* theoretical reflexion on their own *substantive* research?” Without blinking an eye, Georgii Petrovich replied that they could try but they would not succeed. Marx had an encyclopedic education and a splendid knowledge of philosophy, so he could indeed construct a political-economic investigation without resort to the services of specialist methodologists. But *contemporary* psychologists, profoundly illiterate in philosophical theory as they were, would hardly get away with such a trick. Thus Shchedrovitskii.

Naive questions provoke frank replies. And although I did not then and do not now share Shchedrovitskii's theoretical views, his last consideration does not seem to me groundless. A superficial, essentially amateur training in philosophical theory is virtually a distinguishing mark of the average psychologist. Indeed, why talk about the average psychologist when even a recognized master like V.P. Zinchenko often and proudly recounts in public how at university Davydov, as a good buddy, wrote synopses for him on Marxist philosophy, while M.K. Mamardashvili dissuaded him from independent study of the old philosophers and invited him to consult with him in case of need?

The place of philosophical-theoretical culture in psychology has been firmly occupied by "methodology," which usually means amateur reflection—as a rule, with a very weak foundation in any clearly articulated philosophical culture. The central idea of this specific discipline is that methodology is something that can exist and make sense prior to and independently of concrete theory.

Of course, prior to and in some sense independently of a given special science, the history of culture has formulated certain general philosophical, logical, or dialectical principles, but to declare these principles the reflection or "methodology" of a science that does not yet exist would, in my view, be more than uncircumspect. "Method is none other than reflexive cognition (*cognitio reflexiva*) or the idea of an idea; and because the idea of an idea is not given unless the idea is already given, it follows that method will not be given unless the idea is already given."²⁵ This simple and, as always, profound thought of Spinoza does not require additional explanation. It is therefore also obvious what reasons I have to insist that Ilyenkov was not one of the glorious tribe of methodologists-for-psychologists but a psychologist properly so called. And how would you have me call a thinker who did not put a "methodological" gloss on other people's thoughts but formulated his own revolutionary ideas in theoretical psychology?

The most abstract level of psychological theory is the theoretical understanding of how the most elementary psychic act—elementary psychic perception or image—is possible. Not the concrete fashion in which such acts arise and succeed one another, but how they are

possible in principle. This problem is known to philosophy as the psychophysical problem, and at the end of what is now already the last century but one Ernst Haeckel included it among the greatest and probably insoluble riddles in the history of mankind.

Ilyenkov did not leave us a theoretical definition of the abstract psyche. Basing himself on Spinoza, he “merely” found the solution to Haeckel’s “great riddle” and thereby took the first step in the transformation of psychology from magic and sorcery into scientific theory and practice based thereon.

The most concrete level of psychological theory is the theory of personality, for psychology has no object more important than the human personality, the mystery of its birth and development.

In his article “What is Personality?” [Chto zhe takoe lichnost’], Ilyenkov formulated his own theory of personality. However, he himself would surely have preferred to call the latter not “his own” but simply the Marxist theory of personality. And not out of any special personal modesty, but because like Vygotsky he was sincerely convinced that “Marxist” and “scientific” mean the same thing and that he himself was not in some special way “developing” Marxism but simply competently explicating what was already theoretically implicit in it. In any case, for him his theory served the purpose not of self-affirmation but of the search for truth. Incidentally, from the point of view of Ilyenkov’s own psychological theory this circumstance more than anything else testifies to the breadth of its creator’s personality.

Adhering to Ilyenkov’s theoretical positions in psychology does not mean simply adding one more theory to a dozen existing psychological theories of personality—one, moreover, formulated in difficult “Hegelian” language; it means becoming part of the exhilarating process of the revolutionary transformation of an old and unavoidably eclectic-empirical discipline into a new, genuinely theoretical, revolutionary science, which following Vygotsky I would define as *dialectical psychology*.

As a psychologist, of course, Ilyenkov relied not only on the old philosophers but also on modern and contemporary psychology. I have already spoken of his theoretical closeness to Vygotsky and Leontev. It is less well known that Ilyenkov took great interest in

the ideas of the gestalt psychologists. He also had a very serious interest in problems of educational psychology and pedagogy: “Our Schools Must Teach How to Think” [Shkola dolzhna učit’ myslit’]—this is not a snappy title for a popular article,* but a conclusion that he drew from the whole of his Marxist psychological theory, his revolutionary program for future generations. Ilyenkov’s theoretical closeness to his pupil and friend Davydov requires no commentary. Davydov’s widely known work *Forms of Generalization in Teaching* [Vidy obobshcheniia v obuchenii], which raised educational psychology to a new level, is obviously an attempt to realize the potential of Ilyenkov’s theoretical ideas in the psychology of teaching. Finally, the new interest of Evald Vasil’evich in methods of teaching the deaf-blind and his friendship with Aleksandr Ivanovich Meshcheriakov and the foursome of the latter’s pupils** were virtually the central developments of the last years of his life.

One last point. Did Ilyenkov consider himself a psychologist?

Yes, he did.

“All my life I have been sure that I do not think of myself, I think only of philosophy and psychology”—these words were written in his own hand not long before his tragic death and soon after his last lecture to Davydov’s theoretical seminar.

Notes

1. V.V. Davydov, “Vklad E.V. Il’enkova v teoreticheskuiu psikhologiiu,” *Voprosy psikhologii*, 1994, no. 1, p. 131.

2. L.S. Vygotskii, “Istoricheskii smysl psikhologicheskogo krizisa,” in *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1982–84), vol. 1, p. 387.

3. “Dva fragmenta iz zapisnykh knizhek L.S. Vygotskogo,” *Vestnik RGGU: Psikhologiya*, 2006, no. 1, p. 295.

4. Vygotskii, “Istoricheskii smysl,” pp. 434–35.

*For a translation of this article, see *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, vol. 45, no. 4, July–August 2007, pp. 9–49.—Ed.

**This refers to the four of Meshcheriakov’s deaf-blind pupils in his research; see the last article in *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, vol. 45, no. 4, July–August 2007.—Trans.

5. With the exception of the physiology of N.A. Bernstein.

6. I say “freedom of reaction” because within the limits of the $S \rightarrow R$ reaction—and Vygotsky, or for that matter Leontev, does not encroach on the stimulus–reaction relationship itself—there can be no other kind of freedom. The very concept of freedom as such implies a subject, while within the $S \rightarrow R$ mechanism there can be no subject in principle.

Let us note in this connection that according to Spinoza there is and can be no free reaction. As natural, corporeal beings, we are unable to escape from the rigid bounds of natural determinism. Like a child or a drunkard, we can entertain as many illusions on this score as we like, but it is not given to us to free ourselves of the embraces of Mother Nature even in death. Correspondingly, Spinoza understands freedom not as liberation from corporeal determination, not as “freedom of reaction,” but in a fundamentally different fashion—as freedom of active object-oriented action, as the freedom of the corporeal subject to act in accordance with his own nature, which includes not only this organic body but also the whole of infinite nature, which he actively posits as his universal object.

7. Vygotskii, *Sochineniia*, vol. 1, p. 105.

8. Nobel Laureate John Eccles used his powerful imagination to insert a human soul into a synaptic gap and assign it a task similar to that of “Maxwell’s demon”—to let through or block a nervous impulse passing across the synaptic contact.

9. B. Spinoza, *Etika*, Part III, Theorem 2, Scholia.

10. *Ibid.*

11. B.M. Teplov, “Doklad na sessii. K 40-letiiu ‘Pavlovskoi’ sessii dvukh akademii,” *Psikhologicheskii zhurnal*, 1990, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 140–47.

12. E.V. Il’enkov, “K dokladu o Spinoze,” in *Drama sovetskoï filosofii. Eval’ d Vasil’ evich Il’ enkov* (Moscow: Institut filosofii RAN, 1997), pp. 171–72.

13. Thus, in an experimental subject who is working on what would appear to be a purely theoretical task—visually estimating the distance to objects located at various distances—not only activity of the visual system is recorded, but also externally imperceptible activity in the leg muscles.

14. In this sense, it is absolutely meaningless psychologically to talk about whether dogs and cats see the world in color or whether their vision is incapable of perceiving colors. In all responsibility, I declare that dogs, cats, and all other animals see (in general, perceive the world) in an object-oriented manner and are in principle incapable of perceiving abstract colors. Only man is capable of perceiving abstract colors—and only to the degree that he needs to do so in order to live in a human fashion.

15. For those who are not familiar with the substantive-dialectical concept of *object-orientedness* [*predmetnost’*], let me explain that the authors whom I discuss use this term to refer, above all, to the characteristic of activeness that a subject directs toward some objectively existing “external” or “internal” object—it does not matter whether it is discrete, appearing as a thing, or dispersed in space as some kind of continuous field—with which the subject must correlate his activeness. Thus, not only some external thing but also the contents of the subject’s stomach or a light field can be an object of living activeness.

16. N.A. Bernstein, *Fiziologiia dvizhenii i aktivnost’* (Moscow: Nauka, 1990), pp. 373–92.

17. The old term “psychophysiology” does not seem to me acceptable, because it is too compromised by the Cartesian spirit that has pervaded this discipline. The new discipline whose foundations were laid by Bernstein might lay claim to the title “physiology of object-oriented activity.”

18. A.N. Leont'ev, “Kategoriiia deiatel'nosti v sovremennoi psikhologii,” in *Deiatel'nost', soznanie, lichnost'* (Moscow: Smysl, 2004), pp. 294–95.

19. A.N. Leont'ev, “Problemy psikhologii deiatel'nosti,” in *Deiatel'nost', soznanie, lichnost'*, p. 308.

20. Leont'ev, “Problemy,” p. 304.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

24. E.V. Il'entkov, *Dialekticheskaia logika* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1984), p. 28.

25. B. Spinoza, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1957), vol. 1, p. 331.

26. I cite a fragment of Ilyenkov's note as paraphrased by F.T. Mikhailov.