

The Practical Essence of Man

The 'Activity Approach' in Late Soviet Philosophy

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Reality as Activity: The Concept of Praxis in Soviet Philosophy

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In an effort to emphasise how their materialistic theory was different from all those that came before, the authors of *The German Ideology* called themselves 'practical materialists' (praktische *Materialisten*, i.e., *Kommunisten*). They argued that the substance and subject of world-history is labour, man's practical transformation of external nature and of his own social relations. All of Marxism is built upon this axiom.

From the standpoint of common logic, however, this premise seems strange, given that labour is not a thing but an act, a process of human activity. Activity is the subject itself and things are its predicates – how is this possible? Idealist philosophers always stand on the idea that mind is a pure act that rules over the world. So, Marx asserted that 'the *active* side [*die tätige Seite*] ... was developed abstractly by idealism'.¹ All materialists regarded *the body, the physical thing* as the subject of any activity. Whereas Hegel rejected this logic within the physics itself, saying, 'We are used to considering motion as predicate, as a mode; but actually it is a self-being, the subject as subject.'²

Marx was the first materialist to give primacy to Action over Body. Everyone and everything in the history of mankind are modes of human labour. Marx felt that the main fault of all previous materialism was its lack of understanding of the objective reality 'as *sensuous human activity*', or 'subjectively',³ that is, an inability to understand reality as activity and the activity itself as the subject. For Marx, every human thing is nothing other than objectified labour – the condensed and hardened lava of Action. Furthermore, all of the material conditions of labour, including the living bodies of men, are only the prerequisites and 'vanishing moments' of the labour-process.

¹ *Thesen über Feuerbach*, I (MEW 3, s. 5).

² 'Wir sind gewohnt, sie als Prädikat, Zustand anzusehen; aber sie ist in der Tat das Selbst, das Subjekt als Subjekt' (Hegel 2000, § 261).

³ MEW 3, s. 5. The term 'subjective' here, of course, does not mean 'mental', but 'active' or 'being carried out by some subject'.

Vadim Mezhuiev, who was one of the pioneers of the 'activity approach' in Soviet philosophy, correctly defined Marx's historical theory as a 'phenomenology of labour'. Marx's concept of labour replaced Hegel's *Geist* as the substance and subject of world-history. In fact, human labour is the sole personage of *Capital*. Labour, both abstract and concrete, living and objectified (capital), necessary and surplus, waged and free, private and social – in other words, every line of this entire book – represents the great metamorphosis of Labour in the bourgeois age.

Marxists mainly apprehended the 'active side' of Marx's teaching in terms of revolutionary calls to liberate the working class from capitalist exploitation. However, it was not Marx who invented them; at that time, such slogans were already on the tongues of communists and socialists of every stripe. Marx's original philosophical principles, his *logic* of thought, remained unapprehended for a very long time.

Even Plekhanov and Lenin only had a superficial understanding of Marx's philosophy. Among the major ideas of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, no single considerable idea was unfamiliar to materialists before Marx. Therefore, this book contains no proper Marxism, no *practical* materialism. In particular, I doubt whether Marx was in favour of Lenin's notorious definition of matter as an objective reality given to man by sensations.⁴ It was just the kind of materialism that Marx described as 'contemplative' (*der anschauende Materialismus*), for it took reality 'only in the form of object'. Like Lenin, English empiricists, French enlightenment thinkers and Feuerbach understood matter as a perceptible object – 'all the previous materialism' that was criticised in Marx's 'Theses'.

By means of 'sensations', one perceives not so much an objective reality as one's own practical *subjectivity*, transforming the objective reality and, with this, all our sensations. Lenin's definition of matter flatly lacked the 'active side'; that is, the practical ground. It replaced the *concept* of matter with *inadequate empirical abstraction*. Sensation gives reality to man in an abstract and inadequate way, like it does to each animal capable of sensing.

Marx discovered that the real world is given to man practically, in the form of his own labour-activity. Or, to be more precise, objective reality is *not given, but seized* from nature by human labour, by the sweat of a man's brow. Lenin's definition of matter, on the other hand, included 'sensations' in place of 'practice',

4 'Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality which is given to man by his sensations, and which is copied, photographed, reflected by our sensations, while existing independently of them' (Lenin 1968, 18, p. 131).

as the definitions of all empiricists and sensualists had done in the centuries before Marx.

In Spinoza's terms, Lenin's definition of matter passes off one of the properties of matter (the property of objectivity) as its very essence. This definition has no more value than a definition of man as a 'two-legged unfeathered animal'. If you want to express the essence of matter, define what the matter *makes* and how it does so. A good definition must indicate the *modus operandi* of a thing, and not just its features, even the unique ones. As Aristotle wrote, '[e]ach object is defined by the action it performs and by the possibility to perform this action'.⁵ This imperative is a cornerstone of the 'activity approach'. Surprisingly, as far as I know, none of the Soviet philosophers even attempted to offer an activistic definition of the category of matter. It is as if they were all hypnotised by Lenin's contemplative definition.

The heated polemics on the problem of the ideal lasted about half a century in our philosophy. Almost all of its participants considered themselves to be materialists and agreed that the ideal is a reflection of the material, an attribute of matter; therefore, the problem of the ideal cannot be solved without a clear and concrete understanding of the category of the material. In the course of a seminar on Ilyenkov in 2010, Vadim Mezhuev asked those present what exactly they meant by the 'material'. No answer followed. Lenin's definition of matter is of absolutely no help for solving the problem of the ideal. This is, of course, if we do not regard the ideal as 'copying-photographing' the external world by means of our senses.

Mezhuev rightly requires one to include the 'active side' in the definition of matter, to interpret matter not in a form of sensual contemplation but practically, 'subjectively'. I feel that the fact that this problem has not been raised onto such a plane until recently is a most serious omission.

Mezhuev expounded his own thoughts on this issue in a polemical article entitled 'Is There Matter on Mars?'. He believes that one has the right to speak of the 'material' only in respect to human activity. However, human beings have not yet lived on Mars. Mezhuev proposed a distinction between the categories of *material* and *natural*. The former characterises a substantial, objective aspect of human activity, while the latter characterises things by themselves; that is, what the old, contemplative materialism called 'matter'.

This is clearly an activistic approach to the understanding of the material and it deserves close attention. However, Mezhuev erroneously considered this approach to be strictly Marxist. The authors of *The German Ideology* derided

5 *Polit.* 1, 11, 1253a.

the separation of the 'concept of matter' (*der Begriff der Materie*) from the true nature (*der wirklichen Natur*) in the philosophy of 'Saint Bruno' (B. Bauer). In abstraction from the real world of nature, they argued, 'matter' is merely a 'philosophical phrase'.⁶

For Marx, nature (or matter, which is the same thing) is an *acting subject*. At the very beginning of *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx insisted that *nature* (he underlined this word) is a source of wealth just as much as labour, 'which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour power'.⁷ Here, the whole world, including human society with its history, can be seen as an action of nature itself, the outward appearance of the force of nature (*die Äußerung einer Naturkraft*). This is reminiscent of Spinoza.

For metaphysicians, nature is only a surrounding environment, the outer world in which man, the subject, acts. For dialecticians, nature is an acting subject, *natura naturans*, which manifests itself most comprehensively in the objective-practical activity of man.

In Soviet philosophy, Evald Ilyenkov stands closer than others to Marx's 'subjective' concept of nature-matter. Taken by Spinoza's philosophy, Ilyenkov went so far as to equate Spinoza's substance with the dialectical-materialistic category of matter. Indeed Ilyenkov went even further, declaring the subject of thought *not body, but action* – the process of labour: 'Labour ... is the "subject" to which thought as a "predicate" belongs.'⁸

The extent to which it is uncommon or difficult to understand this turn of thought may be judged by the fact that even Ilyenkov's closest disciples have appeared unready to accept it. In a recent discussion, almost all of them defended the concept of the 'thinking body', that is, the body as a subject of thought. The second, *inorganic* body of man has not been even mentioned.

Marx described *all nature* as the 'inorganic body of man', insofar as it is drawn into the process of human vital activity, into the orbit of *praxis*. Plants, animals, stones, air and light all 'in practical respect constitute a part of human life and human activity'.⁹ Human practice unites and concentrates in itself all the powers of nature. Man is a 'practically universal' being, Marx concluded.

The universality of human activity also consists of its 'congruence' to each and every object. In any case, labour tends towards that. Since ancient times,

6 *MEW* 3, s. 89.

7 'Die Natur ist ebensosehr die Quelle der Gebrauchswerte ... als die Arbeit, die selbst nur die Äußerung einer Naturkraft ist, der menschlichen Arbeitskraft' (*MEW* 19, s. 15).

8 Ilyenkov 1974, p. 54.

9 *MEW* 40, s. 515.

this feature of human activity served as a definition of *reason*; wise men act according to the logic of things. Then the objective force of things turns into man's own subjective force, so the 'person himself ... is this inorganic nature as a subject'.¹⁰

These words are written by the mature Marx in *Grundrisse*. Again we see the 'subjective' concept of nature – *Natur als Subjekt*. As before, Marx cleaves to a principle of 'practical materialism': the reality must be 'seized not only in the form of object, or in the form of contemplation', but in the 'subjective' form of activity *par excellence*.

In Soviet philosophy, Genrikh Batishchev wrote a lot about the activistic grasp of objectivity. He constantly stressed that the object is not just a 'raw material' of human activity. In the process of work, man *meets* the world, deobjectifying (*raspredmechivaya*¹¹) and adopting its 'objective dialectics'. The relationship requires the *parity* and *reciprocity* of both sides. The subjective violence to objectivity not only destroys and depreciates the latter, but also impoverishes the subject, man himself. 'The grade of actual perfection of a man can be measured exactly by the richness of his objective relations, by their complexity and multidimensionality.'¹²

According to Batishchev, objectivity is, to a certain degree, 'the foremost, initial and primordial' within the activity; objects not only fill and penetrate the activity, but also 'invigorate' it, turning activity into *creativity*. I believe it is more precise to speak not just of the activity approach, but of the *objective* activity approach or, likewise, of the *practical* one.

Batishchev regularly and insistently discerned two kinds of objective activity, that is, '*objektno-veshchnaya*' and '*predmetnaya*'. The English language may not allow a distinction between the terms '*predmet*' and '*objekt*' (in German, '*Gegenstand*' and '*Objekt*'), a distinction that was of essential importance for Batishchev. Moreover, Batishchev avoided referring to 'activity' as the unilateral impact on a certain object, introducing yet another distinction between '*deyatelnost*' and '*aktivnost*' (which again has no convenient equivalent in English; in German, '*Tätigkeit*' and '*Aktivität*').

In his 'subjective' (but by no means subjectivistic) interpretation of objectivity, which he declared in such an acute form, Batishchev followed Marx, arguing in tune with the first thesis on Feuerbach. Batishchev proposed that, in the process of practical activity, a human being changes not only an object

¹⁰ MEW 42, S. 396.

¹¹ The verb was derived from Marx's term '*Entgegenständlichung*'.

¹² Batishchev 1997, p. 67.

but himself as well, his own personality, and even human nature itself, if other people 'deobjectify' the fruits of his labour. Batishchev also borrowed this proposition directly from Marx. In the third thesis on Feuerbach, 'self-modification' (*Selbstveränderung*) is considered as one of the two poles of the definition of practice (*revolutionäre Praxis*). The same thought is repeated in the definitions of labour in *Capital* and *Grundrisse* in the course of analysis of the labour-process. Batishchev was quite right to contend that this moment of reflection of human activity into itself is constantly disregarded by adherents of the 'activity approach'.

Having burned his bridges, Batishchev broke from Marx when he rejected so-called 'substantialism'. Batishchev himself was convinced that he was fighting against Spinoza and contemporary Spinozists (in the person of Evald Ilyenkov). But there is no doubt that Marx himself was an ingrained, born-and-bred 'substantialist'. Marxism simply could not exist without the concept of labour as the substance of social life and world-history in all of its hypostases. And, as is well known, *Capital* rests on the concept of abstract labour as a substance of value (*Werts substanz*).

Batishchev treated substance as an 'Absolute Object-Thing', in the spirit of the pre-Marxist, 'contemplative' materialism. There is no hint of dialectics in such a treatment of the category of substance, and it is entirely devoid of the 'active side'; Batishchev himself stressed this by defining substance as a 'dead subjectlessness' (*mertvaya bessubjektnost*).¹³ Batishchev's 'substance' is simply a metaphysical scarecrow that has nothing in common with the form of thought, the dialectical category, that Spinoza, Marx and Ilyenkov referred to as 'substance'. Nothing, except the word 'substance', of course.

Batishchev reduced the concepts of labour, practice and production to 'sub-categorical elements of the objective activity'. The definitions of these elements in Batishchev's *Dialectics of Creativity* are rather unintelligible. For example, 'practice' is defined as a characteristic of the objective activity 'as being distinguished from its own, generated by this activity conventionally-ideal expressions – "echoes and gleams"'.¹⁴ Marx himself could hardly have guessed that this florid phrase concealed a definition of practice.

Within the category of 'labour', Batishchev characterised 'the objective activity from the viewpoint of such *difficulties*,¹⁵ which nourish it by an objective

13 Batishchev 1997, p. 408.

14 Batishchev 1997, p. 66.

15 A play on words. In Russian, the words 'labour' (*trud*) and 'difficulty' (*trudnost*) have the same root.

content and which are being solved in the process of this activity'.¹⁶ It is difficult to take this philosophical quibble as a serious *concept of labour*, such as one may find in *Grundrisse* or in the fifth chapter of *Capital*.

Batishchev substituted the historically real content of the categories of labour, practice and so on through 'creative' wordplay. To my mind, Batishchev's philosophical investigations, starting from his first book about the dialectical contradiction, include a fair amount of negligence and arbitrariness in how they treat the venerable, classical categories of thought. This probably explains in part the astonishing 'freedom' with which Batishchev wandered from dialectical logic to existentialism, from atheism to Buddhism and, finally, to Orthodoxy with some 'cosmic status'.

Batishchev evaluated the 'activity approach', which was widespread in Soviet philosophy and psychology, quite critically. He mentioned that, in the course of its swift expansion, the category of activity (*deyatelnost*) had lost its *objective sense*. Any subjective activity (*aktivnost*) of an individual in the external world is regarded as *deyatelnost*. Batishchev disagreed with this 'crude activism, violating the dialectics', as well as with inactive 'substantialism'. Objective activity, as Batishchev treated it, cannot serve, in principle, as a basis of some 'approach' or 'paradigm' because such an activity is a pure *creativity*, undiluted by any algorithms. The real activity approach is simply the creative attitude to one's work.

In describing objective-creative activity, Batishchev elevated himself almost to the heights of poetry: 'It appears before us as a multidimensional harmonious process of meeting of many cultural proto-patterns [*praobraztsy*] or ideals – simultaneously, and for the sake of the deepest penetration into the former ones, and for the sake of creating the new ones, which bestow the spirit of rejuvenation to all their choir.'¹⁷

Surely, this formula can scarcely mean the process of labour of a carpenter or a shepherd. Apparently, Batishchev did not regard the labours of such workers as genuine *deyatelnost*. However, his formula conforms perfectly to the creative activity of some God-seeker or an armchair philosopher such as Batishchev himself.

Ilyenkov, Batishchev's former teacher, defined practice as the 'humanisation' of nature by labour. So clear and easy. While changing the external world in compliance with his needs, man exposes the 'pure forms' of things. In nature, as it is, the form of being of every thing is distorted or complicated by external

16 Batishchev 1997, p. 66.

17 Batishchev 1997, p. 196.

influences on the part of many other things. 'Man in his practice retrieves the own form and measure of a thing.'¹⁸

Ilyenkov understood practice as a process of refining the nature of any thing from external layers and admixtures, from everything that is accidental and inessential for this concrete thing. Practice turns natural phenomena inside out, bringing their essence to light. Therefore, in the practical activity of man, the nature of things uncovers itself, acquiring the pure (ideal) form of its expression, like metal in a melting pot. People perceive these pure forms as something *beautiful* that brings aesthetic delight to their senses. 'Under the form of beauty the universal nature of the given, concrete, singular thing is seized.'¹⁹

The practical changing of the world appears as a source and grounds not only artificial perception, but also logical thought and any other proper human ability. In practice, the melting and catharsis of the universal forms of things are performed within the 'retort of civilisation' and, later, forms should be perceived by human consciousness as the true and beautiful ones, that is, as somewhat 'ideal'.

That is why all the definitions of freedom, as it is, are straight and direct definitions of the humanised nature, and in this sense they are 'anthropomorphisms'. But these 'anthropomorphisms' absolutely do not contain, in themselves, anything 'specifically human', except of the only one thing – pure universality.²⁰

Ilyenkov's conception of practice, as a primary source of the ideal, seems to me the most concrete and profound one in Soviet philosophy. It inherits Marx's idea of nature as the subject and the idea of a human being as a focal point of natural forces. Like Marx, Ilyenkov saw in humanity 'the true resurrection of nature – the accomplished naturalism of human beings and the accomplished humanism of nature.'²¹

The objectively activistic definition of nature (matter) is simultaneously the definition of a human being, and vice versa. In practical materialism, these two definitions are tightly linked to each other. If practice (human labour) makes *all of nature* an inorganic body of man, then the definition of a *labouring man*

18 Ilyenkov 1968, p. 261.

19 Ibid.

20 Ilyenkov 1984a, p. 259.

21 'Die wahre Resurrektion der Natur, der durchgeführte Naturalismus des Menschen und der durchgeführte Humanismus der Natur' (*MEW* 40, S. 538).

is, at the same time, the definition of all nature, or the definition of nature as a whole. Practice is a real dialectical conversion of the human and the natural, subjective and objective, historical and eternal.

'Im Anfang war die Tat' – Faust's formula also expresses the core of Marx's 'practical materialism'. Lev Vygotsky liked to repeat it, and he became a founder of the Marxist *objective* activity approach to mind, to the human psyche. Vygotsky's school, unlike the Ilyenkov school, has kept faith with the activity approach, having deepened and developed it in many respects (psychologists A. Leontiev, P. Galperin, D. Elkonin, V. Davydov and others).

Soviet philosophers, however, made interesting investigations of the practical origins of human language and theoretical thought. The two that seem to me the most considerable are *Monism as a Principle of Dialectical Logic* by Lev Naumenko and *The Riddle of the Self* by Felix Mikhailov.

Naumenko's book was published in Alma-Ata, where the author worked at the time in the Institute of Philosophy and Law of the Academy of Sciences, and promptly became rare. In my humble opinion, *Monism* belongs alongside Ilyenkov's works among the 'gold reserve' of Soviet philosophy. Several years later, in his prime, Naumenko unfortunately left 'big' philosophy for a prestigious job at the journal *The Communist*.²²

The main thread of *Monism* is the search for a single *substance* of scientific knowledge, with its *attributes*, each of which outlines the domain of a particular science, and with *modes* of concrete scientific theories. Naumenko argued that differences between sciences are caused not by the subjective point of view but by the structure of human activity, transforming reality. This practical activity, in turn, exposes the internal structure of the reality itself, the 'logic of things'. Neither thought nor theory, but the very practice of 'splitting' reality into layers, makes cuts, which constitute the concrete subjects of the sciences.

In his famous introduction to *Grundrisse*, Marx spoke about the 'practically true' abstractions that reflect and express real human relations. Thus, the general abstraction of labour appears when its very subject, labour, has already become abstract, having lost its specificity: labour has broken its ties with the particular object and has boiled down to some relatively simple operations. This or that abstract category can leave an imprint within the human mind only on the condition that history has already *practically* performed the 'catharsis' of the object, which is expressed in the form of the given category.

22 The official journal of the Central Committee of Communist Party of the USSR. Its former title was *Bolshevik* (from 1924).

In the spirit of this practically-materialistic conception, Naumenko sought to comprehend the genesis of some of the simplest universal categories, which outline the scopes of subjects of philosophy, mathematics, linguistics and political economy. Practical activity, he wrote, 'unifies' real things, imparting to things that are diverse by their nature one common social function or another. As a rule, this practical genesis of the initial concepts of science remains hidden from the view of scientists.²³

For example, mathematics studies the quantitative relations of things, taken in pure form, in abstraction from their sensually perceived qualities. But where does such a 'distillation' of the quantitative properties of things take place?

There is only one sphere of reality in which the spatial form of bodies, their quantitative definiteness practically exists by itself – that is the practical activity of man for mastering the quantitative side of the world. The secret of paradoxes in mathematics consists of this very activity. The abstractness of the mathematical objects actually rests upon the practical *separability* of the quantitative side of things from this thing itself and upon its independent objective existence in this separateness.²⁴

The primary, practical abstraction is an expression of some (quantitative, in the case of mathematics) properties of things by means of quite different things. This abstraction is a *real relation between things themselves*. Labour, the productive activity of things, places things in such a relation and only then can this relation become an object of thought.

The thing, through which the quantitative properties of other things are expressed, performs a function of *standard* (or, to use the language of *Capital, equivalent*). 'In the standard [*etalon*], form exists as separate actually, practically, and not only in imagination. Here it is actually isolated from the very thing; it appears objectively, materially.'²⁵

The practice of measuring and calculation deals with things themselves, while science and scientific theory operate by substituting standards for things. Science uses standards to construct ideal models of reality, which causes the standards to lose their initial material character. In economics, a similar evolution occurs with money, which is dematerialised and emancipated from any

23 However, the name of geometry preserves a trace of its origin from agriculture, from the practice of 'measuring land'.

24 Naumenko 1968, p. 200.

25 Naumenko 1968, pp. 201–2.

ties with the practical usefulness, or 'use-value', of their material. Money is transformed into the paper-medium of exchange and even into a bodiless one. In mathematics, numbers and figures become such pure ideal standards; in language, sounds and letters, and so on.

As standards lose their materiality, their practical genealogy falls into oblivion. An illusion emerges that money, words and numbers are self-reliant and self-active entities, pure forms, *eide*, dominating matter. For theoretical thought, which is torn from practice by the force of division of labour, this illusion is as natural as the perception of the sun moving around the quiescent earth. Both are the objective 'reversed forms' of thought or, so to speak, the *practically false* abstractions. It is not the object, but the 'subject' with his egocentric angle of view that stands in the centre of such 'Ptolemaic' abstractions.

Naumenko insisted that 'practically true' abstractions do not simply express the relation of thought to its object but, first of all, the relationship of the given object to *itself*, that is, the interrelation of its various sides, 'layers', elements. Here is the difference between practically true and purely formal abstractions. The latter only grasp external correlations between things, the similarities and differences of their properties and the relation of things to an external 'subject'. By no means do they touch their inner nature, or 'substance'.

Naumenko interpreted this substance as a *subject of self-forming*.

Under substance one should understand substratum, capable of self-movement, of imparting to itself a suitable form in the process of development. The form in this case appears as a *structure* of content, as a historically determinate and finite mode of existence of substance within the given conditions.²⁶

The same objective substance is an actual subject of theoretical thought, which is not dependent on the scientist's 'angle of view'. On the contrary, it is our subjective angles of view that are entirely determined by the substance, by the real subject of inquiry. They express and fix certain aspects, phenomena and 'moments' of being of the substance as subject. An error only occurs if some of these abstract projections are passed off as the essence of matter, or if someone, such as a relativist, rejects the very existence of such an essence (substance), underlying any subjective assertions about the object.

In theoretical thought, substance is a 'universal logical space' and individual things are its finite modes or its internal boundaries. Naumenko felt that this

²⁶ Naumenko 1968, p. 230.

method of thinking lies at the bottom of the *classical tradition* in philosophy and in science altogether. 'The cornerstone of this tradition is an understanding of the object not only as a matter of activity of a scientist, who manipulates it one way or the other, but also as the subject of all its own changes, as substance.'²⁷

First, it is necessary to find the simplest and purest form of being of a substance, and then trace how the other, more complicated and concrete 'modes' have evolved and become differentiated from it. That is, in the most general form, the classical method of scientific cognition, as explicitly described by Descartes in his *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*. For Naumenko, the best pattern of its application is the deduction of the economic relations of capitalist society from the simple concept of the commodity in Marx's *Capital*.

In his analysis of language, Naumenko undoubtedly followed in the footsteps of Marx. *Monism* draws a strong analogy between commodity-relations and language as a form of communication, 'that is, the production and exchange of thoughts'.²⁸ Actually, it is more than an analogy, for word and commodity both have one and the same substance, namely, human labour. Within commodity-exchange, this substance reveals itself in a purely quantitative definition of *value*, whereas within word-exchange, labour appears in its strictly qualitative, ideal definition of *thought, idea*. The latter is, so to speak, an 'exchange-value of words' or their *meaning* in language.

At this point Naumenko openly formulated the activistic understanding of language:

The genuine substance of it all is in no way substratum, but precisely the *social process*, the objectifying activity [*deyatel'nost opredmecheniya*]. The sound-matter is alien to thought, accidental with respect to thought. But this very accidentality is necessary: thought necessarily embodies itself in something that is opposed to it, in a material alien to its own nature; namely, in sound. At the necessary joining of these elements, which are completely heterogeneous and accidental with respect to each other, language is born, as a means of communication and as a means of expression of thoughts. Language is a materialised thought, a thought that has turned into sound-matter. The latter is a sound involved in the process of production and exchange of thoughts – a matter which *has become* a form.²⁹

27 Naumenko 1968, p. 283.

28 Naumenko 1968, p. 234.

29 Ibid.

As shown above, Naumenko declared *activity* to be the substance of language, the 'social process' of objectifying thought in sound. Substance is a process, not a thing or a 'substratum'. Things are only forms of expression of Action, of the social labourprocess. It remains unclear how this 'practically materialistic' formula conforms with the definition provided earlier of substance as a 'substratum which moves itself'. Naumenko also left unaddressed the more general problem of whether substance is only the *social* process of activity, or whether the activity-principle has a universal sense. In other words, is an Action, a process of activity, only substantial within human society, or high and low in nature?

Today Naumenko is solidly in favour of the 'substratum', refusing point blank to admit that activity is the substance of anything whatsoever, including social phenomena. 'Only body, just a body' is the sole starting point that, in Naumenko's opinion, makes it possible 'to approach the understanding of thought and mind'.³⁰ He makes no mention now of labour, practical activity as a substance of thought, and the like. In his latest works, Naumenko considers not only natural phenomena, but also social ones, through the prism of 'body, just a body'. The activistic concept of substance is discarded now in the most harsh expressions, as 'ravings' and 'senseless tautology', which ruins the subject-predicate 'sense-structure'. Appealing to this formal structure as a criterion of truth, Naumenko betrays a secret of contemplative materialism, its proper *logic*. This is formal logic: hostile to dialectics always, now and forever.

Ever since Aristotle, formal logic has postulated that only things may be subjects of predication. But what could formal logic know about things? It is *formal* because it abstracts from things, from any concrete objects of thought. To pass judgements on *things* based on the subject-predicate structure of *propositions* would mean mixing words with things, the structure of speech with the structure of reality. For formal logic, the sole reality is verbal (and other symbolic) propositions; it has no idea about any other reality.

Having started once with the Marxist conception of the process of activity as substance and the subject of social phenomena, Naumenko has not maintained this dialectical peak. Instead, he has become a captive to formal-logical 'sense-structures' and rolled back on the position of pre-Marxian contemplative materialism. I would term this materialism a *somatic* one, since it refuses any other substance except for 'body, just a body', where body is Lenin's 'objective reality which is given to man by sensations'. The substance of somatic materialism is the *external, purely corporeal, sensually given* form of the practical activity of man in nature.

30 Naumenko 2008, pp. 67–8.

The revival of practical materialism and its confrontation with the prevailing somatic materialism is a leitmotif of the post-war history of Soviet philosophy. The small book by Felix Mikhailov entitled *The Riddle of the Self* became a conspicuous landmark in this confrontation. Its first edition came out in 1964 and the second 12 years later, in 1976.³¹ There are significant differences between these editions and it is clear that the author considerably advanced his studies of the 'riddling Self' during this period.

Mikhailov's conception of 'Self' – that is, the human soul and personality – clearly shows the influence of L.S. Vygotsky's school, especially of the objectively-activistic theory of psyche of A.N. Leontiev, whose works are quoted frequently. According to Mikhailov, the inner world of a person is an *outer world* of objective culture and social relations, having been interiorised or, to use one of Vygotsky's favourite terms, 'enrooted' (*vrashchennyi*) inside the individual psyche. Objective artefacts, with their socially practical meanings, constitute a sort of language: 'the language of real life, exactly language, in the sense of a certain system of symbols, each of which – the subject or object of action – unites people, regulates their actions, guides their activity'.³²

Mikhailov adopted the phrase 'language of real life' (*Sprache des wirklichen Lebens*) from *The German Ideology*. Marx and Engels described it as the 'material activity and material communication of people', *the social being*, which is reflected and expressed in human consciousness. From that *material* language came the *ideal* 'languages of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc.'.³³

The language of material activity (practice) serves for the communication of people as among themselves, as with nature overall; in such a way Mikhailov continued the classics' train of thought. Man interrogates things in the language of Action, and things answer him by their own counter-action. If man is inactive, then things are mute as well. Being embodied in the sounds of human speech, schemata of objective actions form the *meanings of words*. Later, these meanings themselves become the objects of our purely mental, ideal actions. Words acquire a new life in the world of human communication. Having arisen as a medium in the communication of people with objects, words (similar to money) turn into a 'selfness'. Apart from their practical utility, their material 'use-value', words obtain an ideal 'exchange-value' with respect to other words.³⁴ Language is, so to speak, a 'market of words'. The parallel

31 There is an English translation of the second edition of the book (Mikhailov 1980).

32 Mikhailov 1964, p. 199.

33 *MEW* 3, s. 26.

34 Mikhailov 1964, p. 242.

between words and commodities indicates that Mikhailov, like Naumenko, followed *Capital* in his study of language.

Unlike Naumenko, Mikhailov did not confine himself to the logical analysis of linguistic ideas; he carried out his own investigations in the field which is now called 'psycholinguistics'. To me, that excursus seems dilettante; the author's erudition and wit is not enough. In the absence of substantial proof, Mikhailov's discussion on the genesis of human language looks more like philosophical speculation than a solid scientific theory.

In the second edition of *The Riddle*, Mikhailov revised his conception of the relation between language and thought. He had previously merged words and thoughts into one inseparable whole, up to the categorical denial of the possibility of the existence of thought outside language: 'We would not take, in principle, the assumption of thought without language [*bez*"jazykovoe myshlenie]. Thoughts are not formed in words; rather they are born together with words.'³⁵ This statement does not accord with the practically materialistic view on thought as a function of objective activity as the 'language of real life'.

Ilyenkov regards as an 'antique philosophical prejudice' the statement that language is the sole external form in which thought is expressed. It was Hegel who undermined this prejudice by pointing to the simple truth that thought manifests itself not only via language and other symbolic forms but also in practical actions, in 'acts of forming things'. The science of logic must explore 'the form of thought as such, in all its independence from the verbal, terminological or syntactical habiliments'.³⁶

Mikhailov's acquaintance and personal contact with Ilyenkov shortly after the publication of *The Riddle* clearly played a part. From the second edition of the book, the passage about the joint birth of thought and word and the philosophical story of language of primitive man both disappeared, as did most of the chapter entitled 'The language of real life'. Instead there appeared the following typically Ilyenkovian turn of thought:

Objective activity is the third that emerges as the integral "substance" in relation both to thought and to natural being of people ... Historically developing objective activity is the lap where the thinking human being, aware of himself and the rest of the world – our Self, or Ego – is being formed.³⁷

35 Mikhailov 1964, p. 232.

36 See Ilyenkov 1979, pp. 123–5.

37 Mikhailov 1976, pp. 194–5.

It is interesting that the term 'objective activity' (*predmetnaya deyatelnost*) was absent from the first edition of *The Riddle of the Self*, yet in the second edition it is highlighted, playing the role of 'substance' of the human being and thought. This substance expresses itself in two parallel forms – corporeal and mental: *una eademque est res, sed duobus modis expressa*, as Spinoza should say.³⁸

In practical materialism, *activity* is substance, manifesting itself in corporeal form, whereas in somatic materialism, activity is a mere predicate of a body, and *body* is its subject. Herewith, somatic materialists occasionally write about activity, even about the 'revolutionary transformation of the world', treat practice as a criterion of truth, and so on. One can find whole chapters on these topics in any Soviet manual of Diamat (short for 'dialectical materialism').

Putting aside Marx's concept of activity (labour as substance), we acquire the old materialism of a Baconian type. Francis Bacon had glorified deeds as 'pledges of truth' (*opera ipsa ... sunt veritatis pignora*) and called for the joining of contemplation and actions by durable bonds. It is noticeable that in the Russian edition of Bacon's works, the term *opera* is regularly translated as 'practice', alongside with Bacon's own term *praxis*, which makes the empiricist and confirmed inductivist Bacon look like a precursor of Marx. With this, it becomes impossible to understand why Marx himself labelled all preceding materialism as 'contemplative'.

In general, it can be said that in Soviet philosophy, less the ritual Marxist phrases about practice, 'practical materialism', in a serious sense of this 'logo-type', was not particularly common. In the late 1970s, the activity approach quickly lost its adherents. In his *Dialectics of Creativity*, Batishchev examined the philosophical and psychological conceptions that sought to either thought (S. Rubinshtein), the whole 'individual level of being' (K. Abulkhanova-Slavskaya), educational processes (A. Matyushkin and others), conscience (E. Yudin and A. Ogurtsov) or freedom (Yuri Davydov) and so on from the jurisdiction of the category of activity (*deyatelnost*).

In conclusion, I would note one fact that seems particularly meaningful. The 1960s marked the heyday of 'activity approach' studies, when the Soviet people enthusiastically tried to improve themselves and their state. As quickly as this historical endeavour failed, the category of activity went out of fashion, making way for various 'existentialities' or 'values', interpreted *à la* neo-Kantians. In March 1979, tormented and sick, Ilyenkov committed suicide and, with him, 'practical materialism' disappeared – or lapsed into a coma, at least. Soon thereafter, the Soviet state would repeat the fate of its Socrates, as had happened more than once already in history.

38 'One and the same thing, expressed in two ways' (*Ethica* 11, propositio 7, scholium).