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Activity, Consciousness and Communication

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"Soviet Communitarianism" and the Socially-Constituted Individual

One of the most pervasive beliefs encountered in the human sciences is the idea that each individual owes his or her existence to society, that our personalities, needs and wants are nurtured and sustained by the communities in which we live. This idea, however, is as elusive as it is ubiquitous. It is hard to make sense of the social nature of our being without appearing either to be labouring something so obvious and incontrovertible as to be empty of methodological significance, or to be advancing a thesis so radical as to threaten the very possibility of human individuality and self-determination. The great achievement of the Soviet intellectual tradition of which Evald Ilyenkov is part is that it offers a powerful account of exactly in what sense man is a social being. I'll begin by characterising the central ideas of this Soviet tradition, and raising a powerful objection aimed at one of the tradition's most attractive features: its theory of the mind. Then, by drawing on Ilyenkov's ideas, I hope to show how this theory can be defended from this objection, and defended in a way which leaves us with a compelling theory of man as a socially constituted being.

Ilyenkov is a member of a school of Soviet Marxism which first emerged in the fertile years of the

1920's and 1930's, particularly in the seminal work of Vygotsky, and also Voloshinov (and/or Bakhtin). It was preserved through the tumult of the Stalin period, principally by psychologists of the so-called "Vygotsky school." In the rejuvenation of the Soviet intellectual life after Stalin it acquired some impressive new exponents, of whom Ilyenkov is the most distinguished philosopher. In the latter half of his career, Ilyenkov was adopted by the psychologists of the Vygotsky school as their philosophical mentor. There is no satisfactory name for this tradition, so I'll refer to it here as the "communitarian tradition" in Soviet thought. The term "communitarian" at least marks the resolute anti-individualism of the tradition, its recognition that we, in some strong sense, owe our very humanity to the communities in which we live our lives.

Although it's difficult to generalise across the tradition as a whole, I think we can isolate four interrelated theoretical insights which all Soviet communitarians endorse (at least under some interpretation):

- (1) The mental life of the human individual exists in the forms of its expression. That is, the higher mental functions which constitute human consciousness are essentially embodied in, or mediated by, language (in the broadest possible sense of the term). By "higher mental functions" Soviet communitarians mean mental capacities like thinking, believing, remembering, wishing, desiring, hoping, imagining, and so on. These capacities, in their most highly developed form, constitute an interrelated system of mental functions which only humans exhibit.
- (2) Language is an essentially social phenomenon, in at least this sense, that the possibility of language presupposes the existence of a socially-forged communicative medium: a set of shared social meanings against which alone any communicative act has its reality.
- (3) This set of "shared social meanings" represents a culture. Cultures are real phenomena which are constituted by socially significant forms of activity of a community: cultures objectively exist in the form of social practices.
- (4) It is only through the appropriation of such socially significant forms of activity that the human child becomes capable of the higher mental functions. The child's mind is formed through his/her inauguration into a culture.

These four insights already appear to offer the basis of an argument that we are socially constituted beings. For if language is the living actuality of thought, and language presupposes a socially

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constructed phenomenon--a culture, then it must in some sense be true that the mental life of the individual has its being only in a social context. However, the insights themselves are only the bare bones of this argument: its premises and conclusion remain horribly vague. As I've presented them, the insights tell us that consciousness, culture and language are interrelated, but they don't tell us exactly how. For example, the term "essentially" in (1) and (2) is unclear. When we say that consciousness is "essentially embodied in language" do we mean that the mind necessarily exists in the forms of its expression, that is, that it could not exist otherwise? Or do we mean something weaker - that, say, as a matter of psychological fact, our mental states are always, or almost always, formed in language? So, (1) - (4) need to be developed, if they are to be turned into a theory of the socially constituted individual.

Someone might wonder whether these insights are not insightful enough as they stand without subjecting them to rigorous conceptual clarification. However, one reason why we should care about exactly what these insights amount to is that they appear to offer a potentially innovative and distinctive model for the study of communication as an interdiscipline. For if our mental lives are lived only in society through their expression in socially-mediated communicative practices, then the domains of psychology, sociology and language studies (in all their multidimensionality) will become intrinsically interwoven. But just how these disciplines are interwoven will depend on exactly how mind, culture and language are interrelated. So, the more precise our understanding of (1) - (4), the clearer we shall be about the conceptual framework Soviet communitarianism offers the interdiscipline "communication."

The best way to assess insights (1) - (4) is to look at what the Soviet communitarian tradition has made of them. And in the present context, it makes sense to concentrate on the theory of the mind which Soviet communitarians have developed in the light of (1) - (4), for it's in the philosophical psychology of Soviet communitarianism we find the most radical statement of the social constitution of the individual. This theory of the mind is based on three theses:
(A) Activity - that is, social forms of *material* activity - explains (or is the "key concept" in the explanation of) the nature and origin of human consciousness. Since consciousness is the mark of our humanity, "we become human through labour" (as Leont'ev put it);

(B) The higher mental functions are social in nature and origin. The individual mind lives its life in a social medium: mind is (to adopt a coinage of Michael Cole's) "in society";

(C) The higher mental functions are internalised forms of social activity (Vygotsky's "General Genetic Law of Cultural Development").

According to Soviet communitarians, to understand these theses correctly is to arrive at an understanding of the essence of the human individual as (in Marx's words) "the ensemble of social relations."

Our task, then, is to find the right way of reading theses (A) - (C). I want to approach by considering an objection which purports to show that, since there *can be no* theoretically satisfactory way of interpreting (A) - (C), the basis of the communitarian theory of the mind is completely misconceived. As this objection might come from a number of different philosophers, I'll refer to the objector simply as "the enemy."

The enemy argues that there are two, and only two, ways of reading theses (A) - (C). While first reading makes these theses so weak that they become philosophically insignificant, the second makes them so strong that they are false to the point of unintelligibility. Take, for example, (A) and (B). On the weak reading, says the enemy, (A) and (B) claim that material activity and social interaction are empirical pre-conditions of our mental lives. That is, explanations of how we acquire mental states and of how our intellectual capacities and personalities develop must make reference to our active engagement with our surroundings and with other individuals. But, says the enemy, this is an utterly uncontroversial claim! Of course, to acquire mental states and to develop our minds we have to interact with the world and with others, but no one, whatever their philosophical colours, ever denied this. And something which no philosopher ever denied can scarcely be of vast methodological significance for philosophy!

Okay, the enemy continues, since this weak reading of (A) and (B) is so hopeless, how else might Soviet communitarians intend these theses to be understood. Well, in the case of (A), Soviet communitarians sometimes appear to be advancing the strong thesis that material activity is literally *constitutive* of the mental. This is a philosophically interesting thesis which, if true, *would* make it the case that talk about activity was essential to the explanation of the mental. However,

says the enemy, such a thesis could not possibly be true for the following reason. The mental has all kinds of interesting properties: mental phenomena are capable of having a certain *phenomenology* (experiences "feel" or "seem" a certain way); some mental states have "intentionality," that is, they are directed toward a certain *content or meaning*; we each have a special acquaintance with the contents of our minds which others do not share, and so on. Once we reflect on these qualities of the mental it is obvious that no amount of talk about *material doings*, about transforming nature, could ever explain the possibility of mental phenomena: *We can't get phenomenology out of labour.*

Likewise, in the case of (B), Soviet communarians could be taken to be making the strong claim that the higher mental functions are literally "not in the head," that the mind is, in some radical sense, constituted in public space. Once again, however, the enemy will say that this thesis is at best only metaphorically true. If we take it literally, in so far as it is comprehensible at all, it is false.

So the objection to (A) and (B) appears as a dilemma. They are either true, but (philosophically) trivial, or false. Either way they're theoretically bankrupt.

It might be thought that Soviet communarians can rescue both (A) and (B) by appeal to the idea of "internalisation" in thesis (C). Can't they respond like this? When we say the mind is a social phenomenon and is explained by activity, what we mean is that the higher mental functions must be understood as internalised forms of social activity. On such a view, the process of appropriation of socially significant forms of activity in which the child's mind is formed is a process in which these social activities are translated from the *interpsychological* plane onto the *intrapsychological* plane, where they reemerge, in restructured form, as the child's higher mental functions. Thus, (A) and (B) need not be taken as implying that mental functions are literally located in society, or actually constituted by material activity. Rather, what we're claiming is only that, in the explanation of the nature and origin of consciousness the direction of the explanation runs from the social to the individual: we explain *intrapsychological* phenomena in terms of *interpsychological* phenomena, and not vice versa.

However, the problem with this response is that it invites the same attack as (A) and (B). The enemy will argue that, as a theory of the origin of the mental, the internalisation thesis is ambiguous between two readings. Soviet communarians may be claiming that the child's intellect only *develops* if he or she engages in certain forms of activity (the child only, say, will learn to count if drilled in certain practices). This, however, is true but trivial: of course the child's mind doesn't somehow develop spontaneously! Alternatively, communarians may be saying that the child's mind is somehow *created* by the process of internalisation. (They do claim just this incidentally.) But that surely cannot be true! For, the child could not even begin to internalise anything if it were not already conscious: you can't explain the very possibility of the *intrapsychological* by appeal to the *interpsychological* because there can be no *interpsychological* relations unless the *intrapsychological* already exists.

Thus, all three theses seem open to the objection that they are either trivially true, or false. Either way, it's a disaster for communarianism. To answer the objection, then, we must find some way of understanding the communarian's position which restores its theoretical credibility.

Lest it be thought that I'm discussing Soviet communarianism in a historical vacuum, let me say that the objection I've raised from this unspecified "enemy" has considerable historical actuality. It might be put, not only by some of my colleagues in Oxford, but also by contemporary Soviet thinkers who are suspicious of the communarian tradition. For, while the Marxist pedigree of insights (1) - (4) and theses (A) - (C) makes it almost mandatory for Soviet theorists to accept them under *some* interpretation, many will endorse them only under the weakest possible interpretation. Consequently, there is a rift in the Soviet philosophy and psychology between those who commit themselves only to the weak reading of (A) - (C), and those who argue for something stronger and who vehemently resent the reduction of what they take to be the central theses of Marxist psychology to a collection of truisms. So, our dilemma reflects a real division in the world of Soviet theory.

In what follows I want to try to defend Soviet communarianism from this objection. I want to show that a theoretically intense interpretation of its doctrines is the correct one. In so doing, I'll be drawing in particular on Ilyenkov's ideas, though in many places

I'll be reconstructing and extrapolating from Ilyenkov's position rather than simply reporting it.

The Influence of the Cartesian Conception of the Self

Ilyenkov would have insisted that we first diagnose the source of the problem. Why is it someone might feel that, at best, (A) - (C) express only trivial truths of no concern to philosophy? I believe - and I think Ilyenkov would agree - that this feeling is caused by the dominance in our philosophical culture of a particular conception of the self. This conception, which was introduced principally by Descartes, has had an enduring and pervasive influence on philosophy. It dominates the thought of the Enlightenment (especially the empiricism of Locke and Hume, and the rationalism of Kant) and still continues to hypnotize the Anglo-American tradition of "analytic" philosophy.

At the heart of Cartesianism is an idea we encountered in the attack on the thesis that activity explains consciousness. The Cartesian stresses that the mental has properties fundamentally different from the kinds of properties physical things can have. Examples of such properties are: meaning or content, phenomenological properties (feelings, seemings, pains), subjectivity, undubitability... Descartes himself introduces the idea of a special kind of "mind stuff," a non-extended substance, which is the substratum of all these properties. But the idea of the mind as a special substance is not, I believe, the determining characteristic of Cartesianism.

The basic image at the heart of the Cartesian conception is (to use Rorty's favourite metaphor) the picture of the mind as a great *mirror* containing various representations. Onto the glass of the mind images of the external world are cast. In the Cartesian tradition these images are called *ideas*. The self, or the "subject" of consciousness is presented as located, as it were, behind the mirror, surveying the representations which it presents to him. (Imagine that the images appear somehow on the *back* of the mirror).

The Cartesian position is a form of dualism. The dualism has two dimensions. The first is the dualism of mind and body, the dualism which generates the metaphysical problem of the correlation of mental and physical states and the question of how there can be interaction between the two. The second is the dualism of image and object, which creates the epistemological

problems of how our ideas can be like the objects they supposedly represent and whether we can know reality as it is.

The dualism is not so much a dualism of two *parts* of a person, his mind and his body, but a dualism of two *worlds*. The first is the "object world" of material bodies in space, the external world "out there." The second is the "inner" world of the subject, or self, surveying his ideas from behind the mirror. For our purposes, what is crucial is the way in which Cartesianism portrays the world of the subject. The Cartesian self has three principal characteristics: it is self-contained, self-sufficient, and ready-made.

The idea that the self is self-contained follows from the Cartesian's allegiance to two tenets. First, the Cartesian holds that the self is incapable of direct contact with material things. The self can only be aware of objects indirectly, in so far as those objects are presented to it in ideas. Objects in their brute physicality are "indigestible" to minds. This is because the Cartesian represents the external world in itself as devoid of meaning, and minds are only capable of dealing directly with meaningful entities. *Mental* objects, according to the Cartesian, are intrinsically *representational* phenomena - they present the world as being a certain way - and are thus fit to play the role of the immediate objects of thought. So, for the Cartesian, an object can be present to the self only if it is translated into an idea. Second, the Cartesian holds that ideas are private, each self's ideas are revealed directly only to it. It follows from these two tenets (which are both based on plausible intuitions) that the Cartesian self is acquainted with the material world only via its ideas and only *it* is directly acquainted with those ideas. Thus, each Cartesian self lives in an entirely self-contained world. It is as if we each inhabit our own private picture show.

In its self-contained mental world the Cartesian self is entirely self-sufficient: each self is essentially independent of all others. For, since nothing (including no other self) can affect the Cartesian self except by becoming an object of its thought, its capacity to think must be something it possesses prior to and independently of its interaction with other selves. Its self-sufficiency encourages us to think that the Cartesian self comes ready-made to think. The capacity to think is, for the Cartesian, something which a being either has or lacks, it is not a capacity a being may develop.

We are now in a position to see how the Cartesian's extremely individualistic picture reduces theses (A) - (C) to banalities. First, the self-containment of the Cartesian self grants the concept of material activity no place in the explanation of the nature and origin of consciousness. The Cartesian self inhabits a world in which material activity is impossible, for thought is construed as a relation between the self and mental entities, ideas, which are not possible objects of material activity. The Cartesian self is a contemplating rather than an acting being. And in so far as it does act, it acts mentally, for material activity is confined to a space beyond the frontiers of the mind. Second, the combined properties of self-containment and self-sufficiency accord no role to other people, or to the social world in general, in the explanation of either the capacity to think or the constitution of our thoughts. On the Cartesian picture, there can be no substantive sense in which our minds are located in a public space, or in which our mental functions are derived from interaction with others. And third, if we must think of the self as an entity ready-made to think, then internalisation cannot be the process of the *genesis* of consciousness, as the coming-into-being of the mind. The Cartesian conception thus rules out the possibility of strong readings of the claims of Soviet communitarianism. By so doing, the Cartesian relegates material activity and social interaction to the status of mere "external conditions" of consciousness, and, as such, they play a role of little interest to the philosopher. Of course, the Cartesian will say, human beings do, as a matter of fact, acquire mental states in activity and social relations, but this is a fact about the historical antecedents of our thoughts, rather than about the nature of the thoughts themselves.

Thus, the Cartesian picture strongly reinforces the objection we've been considering. If it's correct, there will indeed be no way of understanding theses (A) - (C) which renders them both true and philosophically interesting. Cartesianism, then, is the enemy.

We now know that to give a philosophically substantial interpretation of Soviet communitarianism we must jettison the Cartesian conception of the self. On the basis of my sketch of Cartesianism you might feel that to reject it would be not difficult. This is not so. When I said earlier that Cartesianism dominates Anglo-American philosophy, I did not mean simply that the majority of analytic philosophers are Cartesians. Rather, Cartesianism dominates our philosophical culture in that it dictates the very terms of

philosophical discourse. The Cartesian framework determines the questions philosophers ask, the methods with which they address them, and (to a large degree) the answers they give.

To substantiate this bold claim would require a lot of argument. Here however, is an illustration germane to the present discussion. It would seem at first sight that the obvious alternative to Cartesianism is a form of psychological reductionism. Simplifying, we can say that reductionist theories come in two varieties. First, those which attempt to analyse mental states in terms of brain states, arguing that the mind is just the working brain. Call this strategy "physicalism." Second, those which analyse mental states in terms of the overt behaviour of the subject. Call this strategy "behaviourism." Are either of these approaches attractive to the Soviet communitarian? The short answer is "No." Soviet communitarians notoriously dismiss both forms of reductionism as a failure. But what is especially interesting about Ilyenkov, Mikhailov and Vygotsky is that they argue that reductionism fails even to be an alternative to Cartesianism! They maintain that though physicalism and behaviourism reject the Cartesian's "substantialism" (that is, the idea of the mind as a special non-material substance), both endorse other malignant aspects of the Cartesian framework. They argue that physicalism, on the one hand, continues to endorse the Cartesian conception of the self: it accepts the idea of the self as a self-contained, self-sufficient and ready-made thinker of thoughts and tries to interpret these properties of that self as properties of a physical system. Behaviourism, on the other hand, accepts the Cartesian's mechanical conception of nature, i.e., of the other half of the Cartesian's dualism, and tries to explain mental processes by principles analogous to those which govern the physical interaction of material objects. What is interesting here is not so much the claim that reductionist strategies won't work, but the idea that reductionism is in fact defined by the position to which it is supposed to be an alternative. Reductionism, as Ilyenkov might have said, is dictated by the "logic" of Cartesianism.

So, where are we? First, we know we're looking for an alternative to the Cartesian conception of the self, and that the standard reductionist alternatives won't do. Second, we know that the rejection of Cartesianism is a very radical project. If Cartesianism does fix the terms of discourse in our philosophical tradition, then its rejection may require us to redefine philosophy

as a discipline. Furthermore, the consequences of its rejection may not be confined to philosophy alone. For example, it might be argued that the Cartesian conception of the self exerts a powerful influence on Western political and moral thought, that the self-constituting, "atomistic" individual of Western liberalism is just the Cartesian self under another guise. So dismantling Cartesianism may demand that we rethink the nature of moral and political agency.

So, with a due sense of the magnitude of our task, let's turn to the Ilyenkovian alternative to Descartes.

Ilyenkov, the "Ideal," and the Socially Constituted Subject

While the Soviet communitarians often voice hostility to Cartesianism, it is rare to find in their writings a fully fledged *argument* against it. Such an argument can, however, be extracted from Ilyenkov's works. For Ilyenkov, the achilles heel of Cartesianism is its account of how it is possible for the world to be an object of thought. This is a very esoteric question. To put it another way: How is it possible for us to experience and to think about a world which exists independently of our thought and experience? The Cartesian's answer, as we have seen, is that the objects of the "external" world are given to the mind only via mental entities, ideas, which represent them to the mind. The reason is that minds can only deal directly with objects which are intrinsically meaningful and, for the Cartesian, material objects are devoid of meaning. Thus, the world may be only a possible object of thought if it is translated into a representational mental medium, ideas.

Ilyenkov would argue that this Cartesian theory of how the world gets to be an object of thought is a disaster. For as soon as one argues that the mind is only indirectly aware of external objects in virtue of its direct awareness of internal objects (ideas), one cannot avoid a catastrophic form of scepticism. This scepticism is not the traditional form of scepticism about the external world, i.e., "If we are only acquainted with the external world via ideas, then we can never know whether the world is really the way our ideas present it as being." It is an altogether more venomous form of scepticism. The Cartesian picture leaves us unable even to form a conception of what a mind-independent object might be like. Consequently, we can't even ask the traditional sceptical question of whether we can

know that our ideas represent the world correctly, because we cannot even know what it would be for there to exist a mind-independent world for our ideas to represent. I shall not pursue the details of this argument; the crucial point is that what's wrong with Cartesianism is its theory of how it is possible for the world to be present to the mind.

Thus, the onus is on Ilyenkov to provide an alternative account of how the world becomes a possible object of thought. And it is in developing this account in his "theory of the ideal" that Ilyenkov's distinctive contribution to Soviet philosophy consists. What, then, for Ilyenkov, makes the world a possible object of thought? Interestingly, Ilyenkov agrees with his Cartesian opponent that there is a problem about how an object with only physical properties can be the kind of thing which interacts with a mind. And he also agrees that this problem derives from the fact that for a mind to experience, or think about, an object, that object must have a certain meaning, or representational significance, i.e., it must be, as it were, present itself to the subject as an object of a certain kind. However, unlike the Cartesians, Ilyenkov denies that the only objects that can have representational properties are mental objects, or ideas. He believes that material objects themselves can objectively possess the properties necessary to make them directly accessible to minds. These properties are themselves not material in nature. Ilyenkov calls non-material properties "ideal" properties (ideal properties include, for example, as well as meaning, the various species of value). Ilyenkov's idea is that if material objects objectively possess, as well as their natural (physical) properties, *ideal* properties too, then they *would* be the kinds of things which could be directly present to the mind.

How do material objects acquire the ideal properties which make them suitable objects of thought and experience? For Ilyenkov, it is this question to which activity is the answer:

It is precisely production (in the broadest sense of the term) which transforms the object of nature into an object of contemplation and thought. (Ilyenkov, 1974, p. 187)

Thus, on Ilyenkov's picture, objects acquire ideal properties in virtue of human activity, through their incorporation into social practices. He writes:

'Ideality' is rather like a stamp impressed on the substance of nature by social human life activity; it is the form of the functioning of a physical thing in the process of social human life activity. Therefore, all things which are included in the social process acquire a new 'form of existence' which is in no way part of their physical nature (from which it differs completely); an ideal form. (Ilyenkov, 1977, p. 86)

And it is to this "ideal form," impressed upon nature by human activity, to which the objects of the natural world owe their status as possible objects of thought.

How can we begin to make sense of this? Well, Ilyenkov invites us to consider the nature of an artifact or created object, say, a pen. The pen is certainly a material thing. But, how do we distinguish this thing's being a *pen* from its being a lump of material stuff? To put the question another way: What would an account of this object in purely physical terms fail to capture? Ilyenkov would say that the object exists as an artifact in virtue of a certain social significance or meaning with which its physical form has been endowed, and it is this fact which would be lost in any purely physical description. It is this significance which constitutes the object's "ideal form." Where does it get this significance? In the case of a pen the answer seems clear: the fact that it has been created for specific purposes and ends and that, having been so created, it is put to a certain use, or, more generally, that it figures in human life-activity in a certain way. One might say, with Ilyenkov, that social forms of activity have become objectified in the form of a thing and have thus elevated a lump of brute nature into an object with a special sort of meaning.

Having grasped Ilyenkov's basic idea in the case of artifacts, the next step is to generalise his insight. Ilyenkov, like many Marxists, stresses that man transforms nature in activity. But, for him, this transformation must be seen, not just as an alteration in the physical form of the natural world, but as the wholesale *idealisation* of it: man transforms nature into a qualitatively different kind of environment. Through social forms of human activity man endows his natural environment with an enduring significance and value, thus creating a realm of ideal properties and relations. Ilyenkov presents this realm as the entire edifice of the institutions of social life, created and sustained by the

activities of the communities whose lives those institutions direct. Ilyenkov calls this edifice "man's spiritual culture," and he means it to include the total structure of normative demands on activity which objectively confront each individual in the community defined by these institutions (including the demands of logic, language and morality). It is only against the backdrop of such a structurally organised realm of ideal relations that particular objects - any objects, and not just the ones we create - become endowed with the significance which is their ideal form.

So, for Ilyenkov, man transforms his natural habitat into one replete with social meanings: man creates an idealised environment. And it is in this process of idealisation that the material world becomes a possible object of thought and experience.

Ilyenkov's account of what the world must be like to be a possible object of thought becomes less obscure when it is complemented by his corresponding conception of what it is to be a thinking thing. To be a creature capable of thought is to be able to relate to the world as to an object of thought. Thus, for Ilyenkov, to be a thinking thing is just to be able to inhabit an idealised environment, to be able to orientate oneself in a habitat which contains, not just physical pushes and pulls, but meanings, values, reasons. And to have this capacity is, in turn, to be able to reproduce the forms of activity which endow the world with ideality, to mold one's movements to the dictates of the norms which constitute man's spiritual culture.

The picture then is this. The idealisation of nature by human practice transforms the natural world into an object of thought, and by participating in those practices, the human individual is brought into contact with reality as an object of thought. Each child enters the world with the forms of movement constitutive of thought embodied in the environment surrounding him or her, and as he or she is led to reproduce those practices so he or she becomes a thinking being, a person.

If Ilyenkov's theory of the ideal is sound, it immediately justifies a strong interpretation of theses (A) - (C). Take (A). On Ilyenkov's account, activity - the material transformation of nature by man - is not a mere empirical precondition of consciousness, but a necessary condition for its very possibility. For activity explains both how the world can be a possible object of thought, and how there can be a creature capable of thinking about it. And further, on Ilyenkov's position,

activity becomes literally constitutive of thought, for (1) he construes the capacity to think as the capacity to act in accordance with the dictates of an enculturised environment, and (2) he identifies thinking itself (in its primary sense) as a species of activity. "Thinking," he writes in *Dialectical Logic*, "is not the product of an action but the action itself" (Ilyenkov, 1974, p. 25). Thus the concept of activity becomes, for Ilyenkov, the basic "unit" of analysis of consciousness - the key concept in the explanation of its nature and possibility.

Once we conceive of thought, as Ilyenkov suggests, as "a mode of action of the thinking body," then it becomes possible to see thought, not as an event in a private, inner world of consciousness, but as something essentially "on the surface," as something located, as Volosinov (1973, p. 26) says, "on the borderline between the organism and the outside world." For thought, on Ilyenkov's picture, has a life only in an environment of socially constituted meanings and its content is determined by its place within them. Thus Ilyenkov leads us to a strong reading of thesis (B): the higher mental functions are constituted in social space. Thought literally is "not in the head."

Further, Ilyenkov's position accords the idea of internalisation a very strong role. For Ilyenkov, the capacity to inhabit an idealised environment is not something the human individual possesses "by nature." We enter the world incapable of the activities which constitute thought, and learn to reproduce those activities only in so far as we are socialised into the practices of the community. As we appropriate, or "internalise," those practices so we are transformed from an epistemically blind mass of brute matter into a thinking being. Thus, on Ilyenkov's picture, inauguration into the community's mode of life must indeed be seen as the process in which the individual mind is *created*.

Ilyenkov offers us a way to resolve the supposed ambiguity of claims (A), (B) and (C) in favour of the stronger interpretation of all three. And this he achieves by ousting the Cartesian's individualistic picture of the self for a theory which represents the individual as socially constituted in a very strong sense. For this is an individual who acquires the very capacity to think only through inauguration by a community into the social practices which constitute "man's spiritual culture," the setting which represents the sole environment in which a being can express itself in thought. On Ilyenkov's theory, the human essence indeed becomes the "ensemble of social relations." We have arrived,

then, at the Soviet communitarians' picture of the socially constituted individual.

Conclusion

What are the consequences of taking Ilyenkov seriously? First, the consequences for philosophy. If it is correct that the organising principle of our philosophical culture is a conception of the self which is fatally flawed, then philosophy faces the awesome task of completely rethinking its purposes and methods, the questions it asks and the answers it gives. Whether or not one is attracted to the Ilyenkovian alternative to Cartesianism, he, and the other Soviet communitarians, do at least give us an idea of what a non-Cartesian theory of the mind might be like. The communitarians' suggestions for such a theory must be seen not as a definitive account of consciousness, but as the opening move in a debate. And this debate will proceed, I hope, not just within and between Soviet traditions of thought, but between Soviet communitarians and those elements within our philosophical culture which, largely under the influence of Hegel and Wittgenstein, have recently begun to articulate deep dissatisfaction with the prevailing Cartesian orthodoxy. The time is ripe for new and productive dialogue between Soviet and Western philosophers, so long estranged from one another, but now intriguingly sharing a community of concerns.

Second, Ilyenkov's work has important consequences for the tradition of Soviet communitarianism itself. It sets an agenda for future theoretical research. For example, if Ilyenkov is right that the communitarian conceptual framework demands that we conceive of thought primarily as a species of activity, then phenomena the Cartesian finds easy to explain suddenly become problematic. For instance, the Cartesian can make excellent sense of the phenomenology of consciousness, and of the privileged access we each have to our own mental states. How can Ilyenkov, with his insistence on the "externality" of thought, account for such "subjective" phenomena? Ilyenkov's work itself, I think, offers no direct answer. However, the communitarian tradition clearly possesses the resources to address this question. It will be the Vygotskian idea of internalisation which will bear the explanatory burden in any communitarian account of the inner dimension of our mental lives. So, Ilyenkov's work puts the development of a thoroughly non-Cartesian conception of internalisation at the top of the theoretical agenda.

Finally, we come to the consequences of all this for the study of communication. Clearly, Ilyenkov's work deals with some of the central concepts of communication theory. His account of the ideal is really a theory of the origin of meaning, and of how our mental lives are mediated by the presence in the world of socially significant ideal properties. Further, his notion of an "idealised environment" may cast light on the idea of a culture. So Ilyenkov's work provides a framework in which to reexamine the concepts of meaning, mediation and culture. But much more dramatically, if what Ilyenkov tries to do with these concepts succeeds, then his work establishes that the conceptual framework of Soviet communitarianism is indeed available as an "innovative and distinctive model" for the study of communication. Significantly, this framework does not just make the development of a new interdiscipline attractive, it makes it unavoidable. I've spelled out how Ilyenkov's position justifies a strong interpretation of theses (A) - (C). It should be obvious, however, that it does the same for the theoretical insights (1) - (4) with which I introduced Soviet communitarianism. For Ilyenkov, thought *necessarily* exists in the form of its expression, that expression *necessarily* presupposes a socially-constructed culture (i.e., an idealised environment), and entrance into the culture is a *necessary* condition of consciousness. And it follows from this that the study of mind, of culture, and of language (in all its diversity) are internally related: that is, it will be *impossible* to render any one of these domains intelligible without essential reference to the others. But if this is so, then it won't just be a good idea to combine the study of psychology, sociology and language, it will be absolutely imperative to do so. The development of an interdiscipline which seeks to grasp mind, culture and language in their internal relations will be essential if we are to understand the human condition.

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Explorative Learning in the School? Experiences of Local Historical Research by Pupils

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Background

MIS, Man in a changing society, started as a research and development project financed by the National Board of Education in Sweden. Its aim was to promote research in the school by the pupils themselves, using historical source material, especially the parish records (which in Sweden are extraordinarily abundant and long ranging), and by using computers. The idea was to make use of the Demographic Database of Umeo and Haparanda (DDB).

However, the basic premise of the project, the use of material from DDB, had to be abandoned. For technical reasons it was impossible to get access to the vast amount of data stored in DDB. From the horizon of the MIS project the "large scale computer philosophy" turned out to be a flop. That implied a crisis in the project, and forced us to reformulate its aims and directions.

We can summarize the idea of the project, which then had to be worked out in more detail, both theoretically and practically, in three phases:

1. Explorative learning
2. The history of the many
3. Modern techniques

In order for the character of the project to be quite clear to the reader, we think it is necessary to explain in some detail its emergence and growth as an offshoot of a social discovery. We will return to that point later. Here it suffices to point out the close

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