



Ontologism in Soviet Philosophy: Some Remarks

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Published online: 20 August 2020
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Abstract

This paper deals with the ontological foundations of the Soviet interpretation of dialectical materialism (Diamat) as exemplified by one of its “founding fathers,” Abram Deborin, in his works of the late 1920s. It has been claimed that the “ontologizing” tendency in Soviet philosophy is due to the influence of Friedrich Engels and his ideas pertaining to the dialectics of nature. However, a more plausible interpretation is that the ontologism of Soviet philosophy is connected with the rejection of the Kantian Copernican turn in philosophy and the idea of the primacy of gnoseology it implies. In this article, I argue in favor of the latter thesis. Ontologism, i.e., the tendency to give priority in philosophy to questions concerning Being, and anti-Kantianism are but two sides of the same coin.

Keywords Russian ontologism · Soviet philosophy · Dialectical materialism · Dialectics of nature · Abram Deborin · Christian Wolff · Friedrich Engels · Evald Ilyenkov · Georg Lukács · G. W. F. Hegel · Immanuel Kant

Introduction

The question of ontologism in Russian thought is part of the broader question of the reception of modernity and modern philosophical movements in Russia. Generally taken, ontologism—i.e., the propensity to give priority to the ontological standpoint over the gnoseological one—is a hallmark of pre-modern, traditional ways of thinking. It is telling that the term “ontology” itself was only coined in early modern times, the first mentions of it being from the beginning of the seventeenth century (Lorhard 1606; Goclenius 1613). Like Molière’s *bourgeois gentilhomme*, who was unaware that he had the whole time been speaking in prose, the thinkers of Antiquity and of the Middle Ages did not know that they were doing ontology. But they were. We seek in vain in the philosophers of the pre-modern era any systematic discussion of gnoseological issues. The “Copernican turn” of modernity inverted this state of

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affairs in philosophical thought and radically challenged the received modes of intellectual culture.

When discussing the peculiarities of Russian thought, this impact of emerging modernity should not be left unnoticed. In the case of philosophy, this would not even be possible, since philosophy in Russia was an eighteenth-century import previously unknown in the country. On the contrary, its idiosyncrasies follow from the division of Russian culture during the modernization of the country initiated by Peter I.¹ The duality of the well-known controversy between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers was replicated in the duality of Russian philosophical thought, mainly represented by an idealist-religious tradition, on the one side, and by currents of Western philosophy transplanted into Russian soil, such as Wolffianism, Hegelianism, Neo-Kantianism, positivism, etc., on the other. Aleksej Losev, the “last Mohican” of Russian Idealism, who lived long enough to witness the demise of the Soviet Union, perceptively described this divide by saying that the Russians traditionally possess the “pre-rational conviction” that “being is only accessible to the undivided spiritual life, only to the fullness of life”; this is a conviction which “no gnoseology” is able to shake (Losev 1919, p. 82). The principle of Western *ratio* is subjective and human, whilst the principle of the Russian thinkers, *Logos*, is objective and divine (Losev 1919, p. 86). Although Losev here does not use the terms “ontology” and “gnoseology,” the contraposition is evident.

It is not difficult to understand why Russian traditionalism takes an ontological stance. It rejects—or tries to reject, as much as possible—some of the attitudes distinctive of the culture of modernity, especially the subjective gnoseological point of view, which is indeed constitutive of the modern worldview. The ontologism of Russian thought explains a further conspicuous trait of Russian philosophical culture, namely its Anti-Kantianism, a trait which has been noted by many researchers, including Anatolij Akhutin in his article “Sofija i čert” (“Sophia and the Devil”; Akhutin 1990). This, too, is not at all a surprise, since it was Kant who, with his “Copernican turn,” expressly stated the primacy of gnoseology over ontology: “Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* [...] have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition” (Kant 1998, p. 110; *CPR* B, xvi). Kant offers, I think, the best formulation of how the modern use of the concepts of “ontology” and “gnoseology” should be understood: the “ontological gaze” takes the external reality and the things in themselves as given and sees nothing problematic in making even sweeping assertions concerning the character of reality, whereas the “gnoseological gaze” first examines our cognitive capacities before making assertions about the objects of knowledge.²

¹ This is not the place to further discuss the question of the duality of Russian culture, which seems to be one of its most important characteristics. Instead, I refer here to the ideas put forth, e.g., by Akhiezer (1997, 1998).

² This specification seems useful, since nowadays it has become fashionable to apply the concept of “ontology” to various approaches that do not have much in common with the original use of the term. See, for example, the “Ontology Gas Calculator” (<https://ontcalc.com/>).

Russian Silver Age philosophers have made several attempts to refute Kant and to cancel his Copernican turn, starting with Vladimir Solov'ëv's works and ending with Evgenij Trubeckoj's *Metafisičeskie predpoloženiya poznanija* (*Metaphysical Presuppositions of Cognition*), which appeared in the year of the 1917 revolution and can be regarded as one of the most ambitious refutations of Kant from this current (Trubeckoj 1917).

Deborin, the Founder of Soviet Ontologism

This being said, it may come as a surprise that the “ontological gaze” (as well as Anti-Kantianism) is as strongly present in Soviet philosophy as in traditional Russian philosophy. Soviet philosophy is based on Marxism, which is a part of the modern worldview, but, paradoxically, it falls back on ontologism in the old sense. Many scholars and researchers have noted that the ontologism of Soviet Marxism, especially its codification in the form of Diamat (Dialectical Materialism) is a fact comparable to that of Russian religious philosophy. According to the recently deceased Russian philosopher, Sergei Mareev, a pupil of Evald Ilyenkov, whose formation took place during the Soviet era:

The doctrinary conception of dialectics, rooted in Soviet philosophy and from which the present-day “ontology” hatched out, stems from Plekhanov and Deborin, not from Lenin [...]. For them, dialectics was a science of “the world in its totality,” a kind of metaphysics, like the ontology of Christian Wolff, with the exception that this dialectics continuously stressed that “everything is developing.” [...] In ontology, reality is examined without paying any attention to consciousness. (Mareev 2006, pp. 125–126)³

For Wolff, ontology was nothing but the *philosophia prima* or metaphysics, and its task was to describe and analyze the most general traits of Being. In principle, ontology only differed from the other sciences by being the most general science. Physics studied the interaction and movement of bodies. Mathematics was more abstract, studying quantities as such. And ontology was the most abstract science, reflecting upon “Being” in general. However, although correct, Mareev's comment requires a specification: the problem with Wolff (and with the Diamat tradition) is not so much ontology itself, which is a legitimate branch of philosophical inquiry, but “ontologism,” which I already defined as the view that ontology has priority over gnoseology. This is consistent with the teaching of Wolff, who defined “ontology” as the “first philosophy,” the task of which is to deal with the “first general concepts which pertain to all things.”⁴ On this view, the rest of philosophy should then follow in the footsteps of ontology. This position had weighty consequences, since it amounted to the claim that it is allowed to make metaphysical statements

³ This is a Finnish version of the paper that Mareev read at a symposium in Tampere, Finland in 2005.

⁴ “Die erste Philosophie [...] oder die Grund-Wissenschaft, wie ich sie nenne, handelt die ersten allgemeine Begriffe ab, die allen Dingen zukommen” (Wolff 1740, p. 71, §. 35).

about reality in general without first considering whether we have the cognitive capabilities to know this reality.

In fact, Deborin, the real founder of Diamat and a pupil of Plekhanov, stood very close to Wolff in his conception of philosophy. One comes to this conclusion after even a cursory analysis of Deborin's texts. For example, in his programmatic articles, published during the philosophical discussion of the 1920s, his definition of dialectics was based on an ontological approach. According to Deborin, dialectics must be understood as "the science of the general laws and forms of movement in nature, in society, and in thought" (Deborin 1929, p. 59). For him, "dialectics forms the truly scientific way of handling reality [*istinno naučnyj sposob obrabotki deistvitel'nosti*], it is the basis on which the building of science rises as a system of relations and processes, because it is possible to obtain an exact picture of the universe, of its development [...] only via dialectics" (Deborin 1929, p. 55).⁵ The whole "system" of Marxism, as it was conceived by Marx and Engels, can, according to Deborin, be summarized as follows:

1. Materialist dialectics, as a science of law-governed relations [*nauka o zakonomernykh svjazakh*], constitutes the general methodology, the abstract science of general laws of motion.
2. The dialectics of nature consists of the following levels: mathematics, mechanics, physics, chemistry, and biology.
3. Materialist dialectics applied to society is historical materialism (cf. Deborin 1929, p. 33).

The way Deborin understands Diamat is astonishingly similar to what Wolff taught in the first half of the eighteenth century. For both, philosophy is not a discipline *sui generis*, but is part of "science."⁶ For both, science and philosophy form a unified system that has an ontological character and where different strata of being are subordinate so that for each stratum there is a corresponding science or discipline. In the case of Deborin, the most abstract (thus, philosophical) "sciences" are those of nature and society, dialectical and historical materialism.

The Deborinian interpretation of Marxist philosophy was extremely influential. Deborin fell into disfavor as early as 1930 as a result of the "philosophical campaign" against him initiated by Stalin, for whom Deborin's Menshevik past had always been suspicious. But the young Stalinist philosophers who dethroned the erstwhile "pope" of Soviet philosophy did not make any substantial changes to the Deborinian interpretation. Deborin was criticized for failing to understand the importance of a "Leninist phase" in Marxism, for detaching theory from practice, and for slavishly copying dialectical schemes from Hegel, but not for prioritizing

⁵ The quotation is from the article "Materialističeskaja dialektika i estestvoznanie," originally published in *Voinstvujuščij materialist*, n. 5, 1925.

⁶ Actually, Wolffianism can rightfully be regarded as an early form of scientism. This may explain Wolff's popularity in Germany, Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia around the mid-eighteenth century, in an age when a general optimism about the possibilities of science was widespread.

ontology over gnoseology. For the philosophers of the ascending new Stalinist generation, too, as Sergei Mareev remarks, “philosophy remained a ‘Diamat,’ that is, a doctrine of the world matter [*mirovaja materija*] in its ‘eternity, infinity, and development’” (Mareev 2008, p. 38).

Engels as the Originator of Diamat Ontology?

Now, it is true that Deborin relies heavily on Friedrich Engels’s ideas about the dialectics of nature, not only in *Anti-Dühring*, which was well-known to the theoreticians of the Second International, but also in the manuscript on the methodological problems of the natural sciences on which Engels worked between 1873 and 1883. Engels interrupted the work as he began to edit the second and third volumes of Marx’s *Capital*, and his own manuscript was published in 1925 in the Soviet Union with a title given by the editors (thus not by Engels himself!), *Dialectics of Nature*. Deborin’s articles of the 1920s on the question of Marxism and the natural sciences were actually nothing but a popularization and generalization of Engels’s ideas on the dialectics of nature. Deborin was clearly keen to interpret Engels in a manner that was conform to his own “ontologizing” mode of thought.

Deborin’s ontologism is obvious for example in the manner in which he comments on Georg Lukács’s now famous *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1924). Deborin quickly reviewed it in the journal *Pod znamenem marksizma*, of which he was the chief editor. As is well known, in this book Lukács presented a subjectivist interpretation of Marxism. He denied the possibility of a dialectics of nature, claiming that it is but a kind of naturalistic metaphysics. He claimed that, in fact, dialectics presupposes a human subject and, therefore, that it can occur only in history and society. Deborin noted Lukács’s attempt to present a new interpretation of dialectics: “Comrade Lukács takes the stand of those who in one way or another accept *historical materialism* but reject *philosophical materialism*” (Deborin 1924a, p. 50). He does not warm up to Lukács’s claim that dialectics presupposes a subject-object relation,⁷ and replies quoting a definition of dialectics that Hegel had given in his *Encyclopedia* (§. 81 and *Zusatz*):

Everything that surrounds us may serve as an example of dialectic. We know that everything finite changes and is destroyed; its change and destruction is nothing but its dialectic; it contains in itself its other and therefore it transcends the boundary of its immediate existence and goes over into its opposite. (Deborin 1924a, p. 64)

⁷ Of course, there exists a dialectic of subject and object, and Deborin explicitly reproaches Lukács of not noticing its presence in Engels’s exposition of the historical process (Deborin 1924a, p. 55). But it is quite another claim to assert that there cannot be any dialectics without the subject, as Lukács did. In Hegel, too, the subjective dialectics, i.e., the dialectics of the Spirit, is preceded by the objective dialectics of nature, from which a self-conscious subjectivity has not yet emerged.

Thus, for Deborin dialectics does not presuppose the existence of a subject. It is rather a universal theory of development with an ontological character. Furthermore, Deborin stresses repeatedly that, on the question of the functions of dialectics, there is “no discrepancy between Hegel, on the one side, and Marx and Engels, on the other. They all view the world—nature and history—as a *dialectical process of development*, in which everything finite emerges, changes, and is destroyed due to its built-in internal *contradictions*” (Deborin 1924a, p. 65). Contrary to the claims of Lukács, there are no differences between Marx and Engels as to the dialectics of nature. That Marx did not write on the subject was, according to Deborin, only the result of a division of labor between the two: Whilst Marx focused on social theory and political economy, Engels took care of the natural sciences.

Deborin is probably quite right in that there are no substantial differences between Marx and Engels on this issue, but the problem with the status of the dialectics of nature remains nevertheless. Since Lukács, many scholars have criticized the Engelsian *Naturdialektik* as a form of ontology. At first sight, this reproach may seem to be well-founded. After all, Engels had formulated the so-called “three fundamental laws of dialectics,”⁸ which he had taken from Hegel and claimed that they are equally applicable both to the material world and to thought—a claim which he made without any preceding scrutiny of our cognitive capacities. So, it would seem that Engels, too, was an “ontologist” and that Deborin had interpreted him correctly.

A closer analysis of Engels’s philosophical texts reveals, however, several interesting oscillations and inconsequences, which Deborin and the Soviet philosophers following him have not taken into account. For the latter, Engels was an impeccable authority. However, he was not—and did not even pretend to be—a professional philosopher, and this fact has left its marks in his *œuvre*. Kaan Kangal, who recently analyzed *in extenso* both Engels’s work and the subsequent discussions on *Naturdialektik*, remarks that Engels’s project is heterogeneous insofar as he understands dialectics differently in different parts of his manuscripts. Moreover, his historical references to the dialectical tradition and to its predecessors (Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel) “are too sketchy and inconclusive” (Kangal 2019, p. 217) to allow any far-reaching conclusions.⁹ It can be added that Engels does not clearly pose the question of which approach should have primacy in philosophy: the ontological, the gnoseological, or neither. In some cases, however, Engels took a clear-cut “gnoseologist” stance. For example, when his adversary Eugen Dühring promised to deliver a theory of *being* as the “all-embracing one,” Engels mocked such ambitions mercilessly. The most comical part of Dühring’s thought was, according to Engels, that, although an atheist, he nonetheless used the ontological argument to attempt to prove that, when we think of *being*, we think it as *one* idea. Engels stated that the “unity of the world does not consist in its being [...]. Being, indeed, is always an open question

⁸ These three laws are: (1) the law of unity and conflict of opposites; (2) the law of quantitative changes turning into a new quality; (3) the negation of negation. In *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels toyed with the idea of a fourth “law,” namely that of a “spiraling form of development,” but dropped it from the final presentation.

⁹ The article of Kangal quoted here is a summary of a larger study on Engelsian *Naturdialektik* (Kangal 2020).

beyond the point where our sphere of observation ends” (Engels 2010, p. 41). This remark of Engels is well in line with Kant’s critique of the ambitions of the old, Wolffian metaphysics which claimed to be able to say something positive about *de ente in genere*. The real unity of the world, Engels continued, consists in its materiality, i.e., exists objectively, outside of the subject’s mind. In this, Engels foreshadowed Lenin’s later idea that matter is nothing but that which is independent of the cognizing subject in the cognition process. We may add that this independent element is, in fact, nothing else than Kant’s thing-in-itself, although neither Engels nor Lenin seem to have noted this.

This is not the place to delve further into Engels’s project of the dialectics of nature. Suffice it to mention that Engels seems to have never thoroughly studied other thinkers than Hegel and Feuerbach. His view on Kant is clearly biased, because he mixed up Kant’s philosophy with the positions of the Neo-Kantians of the second half of the nineteenth century. This led to a certain fuzziness in his views concerning the relation between ontology and gnoseology. He takes the Neo-Kantian interpretations of Kant at face value and seems to think that Kant is an agnostic or, even worse, a subjectivist. This is obvious from his discussion, in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, of how “practice” dispels, as he alleges, the problem of things in themselves (see Engels 1941, pp. 22–23). It could even be said that Engels replaces gnoseology with a theory of practice. For the scope of the present paper, it is important only to note that the inconsistencies in Engels’s philosophical *Nachlass* show that we cannot conclude with certainty that Engels is a proponent of ontologism. The indisputable “ontologizers” of Marxist philosophy are rather Plekhanov and, above all, his disciple Deborin, not Engels, despite the fact that Engels’s philosophy—especially his neglect of the Kantian gnoseological question—may have supported the Diamat philosophers in their interpretation.

Deborin’s Criticism of Kant

If the ontologism of Soviet Diamat cannot be explained solely on the basis of the influence of Engels, which additional factors, then, may have contributed to it? I have already hinted to it: the aversion towards the Kantian primacy of gnoseology. Kant’s “Copernican turn” should not be interpreted as an easily corrigible position or only as the “mistake” of an individual thinker, as for example the Russian Silver Age philosophers seem to have thought. Kant rather merely expresses a central thesis of the modern worldview. Thus, a Marxist who rejects the Kantian position already *a limine* cannot credibly separate his own position from the conservative critique of modernity.

This is especially the case with Deborin. In the 1920s, Deborin attempted to explain the philosophical core of Marxism by analyzing its historical predecessors. He published a series of articles on dialectics in Kant, Fichte, and Hegel trying to explain how these thinkers had contributed to the emergence of Marxist dialectical materialism. The first of these articles, an extensive essay on dialectics in Kant, was published in 1924 in the first issue of *Arkhiv Marksa i Engel’sa*, a journal founded and edited by David Rjazanov (Deborin 1924b). For Deborin, the cosmogonical

ideas of the pre-critical Kant boil down to a “peculiar mechanistical ‘*dialectics*’” (Deborin 1924b, p. 17) or to a theory of equilibrium of opposite physical forces (Deborin 1924b, p. 24). In his critical phase, Kant found the dialectical antinomies of reason, a discovery that Deborin considers to be of no little merit. But he nevertheless continues with a rebuke: “from his point of view, he was unable to show the *necessity of the contradictions* in the things themselves” (Deborin 1924b, p. 28). This is correct insofar as Kant could not “from his point of view” have claimed that the things in themselves possess contradictions, because we cannot, according to him, have any knowledge about the things as they are in themselves, i.e., outside the epistemic relation.

Furthermore, Deborin finds faults in Kant’s doctrine of transcendental apperception. He sees in it an illicit attempt to reduce consciousness to an individual ego: “This transfer of the content of the subjective ego to all human beings is a flagrant contradiction. [...] transcendental apperception, consciousness in general, means nothing else than the necessity to transgress the boundaries of the subject” (Deborin 1924b, p. 35). Here Deborin evidently does not grasp Kant’s idea that the transcendental apperception gives us a general structure of consciousness, which is applicable to all individual consciousnesses. He sees the whole Kantian doctrine of transcendental apperception as a rather irrelevant theory: “So justifiable the claim may be that the subject takes part in the process of cognition [...], it nevertheless is a condition of a purely psychological order” (Deborin 1924b, p. 36). The next sentences confirm that the philosophy of Deborin falls, thanks to his rejection of Kant’s doctrine of apperception, into the category of pre-Kantian ontology:

The *inner dialectics of cognition* consists in that *the subject expresses judgements, the contents of which are completely independent of the subject*. In judgement, I always go beyond the boundaries of my judgement and I am abstracted from any “I” [*otvlekajus’ ot vsjakogo “ja”*]. This means that the idea “I think” does not at all accompany my judgement. A cognitive judgement essentially possesses an objective meaning and refers to the external world, to the transsubjective region, i.e., to that which is not my representation. My representations, as *my* representations, are subjective, but the same representations of mine are objective, i.e., they do not have the character of being subjective insofar as they refer to [...] the external world. (Deborin 1924b, p. 36)

Deborin concludes that “*objective knowledge is possible because our ‘ego’ already before the act of cognition is a part of objective being*” (Deborin 1924b, p. 36).

In other words, Deborin acquiesces with the claim that in my representations there is both an objective and a subjective content and that the presence of objective content in the mind is a sufficient proof of its existence in the external world. He does not seem to notice that, when Kant speaks of the act of transcendental apperception (which consists merely of the “I think” accompanying all my representations; cf. *CPR* B 404 sqq.), it is just this act itself which is different from the representations and constitutes the ideality. As an act of constitution of ideality, the “I think” sets itself in opposition to the material world. Precisely because the “I think” is opposed to the representations of the things constituting the material world, the existence of the latter cannot be concluded from the act of thinking. Deborin’s claim

that we already have in our representations ab initio an objective moment which guarantees the truth of the ontological thesis of the existence of things outside of us is not different from the assertion Wolff already made almost two centuries earlier in the first paragraph of his *Deutsche Metaphysik*, namely that “we are conscious of ourselves and of the other things, no one can doubt it.”¹⁰ Wolff thereby declared his opposition to the Cartesian doubt concerning the existence of “other beings.” As the Russian scholar Vladimir Žučkov comments in his introduction to a recent Russian edition of Wolff’s said work, “it turns out that the Wolffian assertion is grounded on a practical and voluntarist postulation or, to be exact, on a dogmatic postulation of existence. Existence *must* be. In other words, we see here [...] an illicit conversion of that which is desired into that which exists [...]. This kind of postulation is the ground of Wolff’s entire metaphysics and forms its dogmatic essence” (Žučkov 2001, p. 34). We may say that the doctrine of Diamat rests on a similar ontological postulate.

However, Deborin builds up his ontological viewpoint with further arguments. He utilizes Hegel’s critique against Kant to back up his conviction that Kant’s Copernican turn is a subjectivist deviation. True, Deborin might here rely on Lenin’s well-known dictum that “when *one* idealist criticises the foundations of idealism of *another* idealist, *materialism* is always the gainer thereby” (Lenin 1961, p. 281). However, Deborin’s strategy to bash Kant with Hegel’s arguments does not lead to such a gain as Lenin intends. Both Deborin and Hegel criticized Kant’s concept of things in themselves. According to Deborin, “[t]here is nothing dialectical in the Kantian *metaphysical* opposition between the thing in itself and appearance. However, this *rift*, this *duplication* of the world prepares an inevitable dialectical resolution of the problem” (Deborin 1924b, p. 51). We find this dialectical solution in Hegel (Deborin 1924b, p. 52). Deborin summarizes Hegel’s argument in the following manner. According to Hegel, the thing consists of a totality of its properties. Furthermore, the “determinateness, in virtue of which *a* thing is *this* thing only, lies solely in its properties. It is through them that the thing differentiates itself from other things” (Hegel 2010, p. 429). It follows from this that the thing, which at first was something subsisting in itself, has now passed over into properties (Hegel 2010, p. 429). The thing in itself, which was initially an extreme term existing in itself, has now, thanks to the properties which constitute it, lost its character of self-subsistence and has become only a moment of the middle term. In turn, the middle term, which unites the thing and its appearance, has become the new self-subsistent entity (Hegel 2010, p. 230). We see here the usual Hegelian solution of subsuming the subjective and the objective, the ideal and the material, in a *tertium datur* of a higher unity. Deborin defends Hegel’s re-interpretation of the Kantian *Ding an sich* by commenting that the “properties of a thing in itself are not only the postulate of an external reflection, but also its own determinations. The thing in itself is not some indefinite ground posited outside its external manifestation, but is given in its properties” (Deborin 1924b, p. 52).

¹⁰ “Wir sind uns unser und anderer Dinge bewusst, daran kan niemand zweiffeln” (Wolff 1729, p. 1; § 1).

From a materialist point of view, this argumentation can be countered with a rather short but definitive answer. It is obvious that the *prôton pseudos* of the Hegelian argument lies simply in that he interprets the Kantian appearances (*Ercheinungen*) as “properties” (*Eigenschaften*). For Kant, appearances are not, however, objective properties of things, but the subjective products in us of the things that affect us. For this reason, appearances need not have something in common with the real properties of the things. A rose may appear red without thereby having in itself the property of “redness.” To use an example from modern physics, the impression of redness is created by a certain wavelength of light rays which are reflected by the petals of the rose, and our sense-organs interpret this subjectively as a red color. Hegel, however, surreptitiously (I believe this expression is not too strong) tries to provide an objective ground for subjective appearances by rebranding them as properties. This rebranding of course leads to a suspension of the Copernican turn and opens the door for a rehabilitation of ontological notions.

What About Soviet “Gnoseologism”?

The ontological interpretation of dialectics was, as I have shown, prevalent in the “official” version of Soviet Marxism. There were, of course, some developments of the initial doctrine, of which we can mention the so-called “Leningrad Ontological School,” the main proponent of which was the philosopher Vasilij Tugarinov. Interestingly, Tugarinov turned to the legacy of Spinoza, whose philosophy he interpreted as a metaphysical ontology and insisted on the primacy of the ontological category of substance even for Marxist philosophy.¹¹

Serious opposition against the dogmatic ontologism of the Diamat of the 1950s arose, however, soon after Stalin’s death. The so-called “Ilyenkov–Korovikov affair” at Moscow State University, which started in 1955 and which led to the expulsion of Evald Ilyenkov from MGU a couple of years later, coiled expressly around the question of whether Marxist philosophy was an ontological doctrine or not. Evald Ilyenkov and Valentin Korovikov were accused of putting too much emphasis on gnoseology. Indeed, the label of “gnoseologism,” which became attached to Ilyenkov during these discussions, stuck to him until the end of his life. Although harassed by official ideologists of Marxism–Leninism, Ilyenkov soon became the hero of the *shestidesiatniki*, i.e., the members of “sixties generation” in philosophy. One factor of the attractiveness of Ilyenkov’s thought was that he criticized the received ontological interpretation of Diamat and emphasized the importance of the heritage

¹¹ There is not much literature on Tugarinov or the Leningrad Ontological School, but I can here at least refer to the short paper by Ivanenko (2014). In Soviet philosophy, there was some discussion about the relation between the ontological categories of “substance” and “matter” (in the Leninist sense). As to Spinoza, it is interesting to note *en passant* that the Soviet philosophers interpreted him as a metaphysician (in the sense Engels gave to the term “metaphysics,” i.e., as a non-dialectical philosophy). So, his ontology was considered metaphysical, too, despite such dialectical ideas as the *causa sui*. This seems to imply that the Soviet philosophers thought that a non-metaphysical ontology would be possible and, actually, this was Diamat.

of German classical philosophy, especially Hegel. Sergei Mareev summarizes the problematic as follows:

“Ontology” is essentially a return to pre-Kantian metaphysics, and “gnoseology” a return to the Lockean and Humean theory of cognition, since the first deals with being outside of all cognition, and the second with cognition without respect to being. This is not even a way “back to Kant,” but “back to Wolff.” Thus, the former Soviet philosophy, “ontologizing” dialectics, lost even the gains made by German classical philosophy [...]. Ilyenkov attached particular importance to this tradition and knew it brilliantly. Not only did he know it, but was also able to make Hegel’s method his own method. (Mareev 2008, p. 39)

Ilyenkov’s Hegelian viewpoint did indeed imply a break with the prevailing ontologism of Soviet philosophy. This is why he was stigmatized as a “gnoseologist” by his more conservative opponents. But is this label actually justifiable? Let us take a quick look at the matter.

Hegel’s stance on the question of the opposition between ontology and gnoseology was dictated by his general ambition to overcome Kant. For Hegel, Kant had caused much mishap by constructing a dualistic philosophy full of unresolved oppositions, such as phenomena *vs.* things in themselves, sensuality *vs.* reason, and so on. Hegel wanted to bring about a “conciliation” (*Versöhnung*) of these oppositions. From this point of view, even the opposition between ontology and gnoseology, brought under the spotlight by Kant’s Copernican turn, should be conciliated and sublated in a higher-level identity of both. In Hegel, this identity was accomplished through his concept of the Spirit, *der Geist*, which is the product of the process of the mediation (*Vermittlung*) of substance and subject. Ontology and gnoseology are thus reduced to mere subordinate viewpoints in the grand totality of the evolving Spirit.

Of course, Ilyenkov rejected Hegel’s Absolute Idealism. But his “Hegelian” standpoint led, by its inner logic, to a similar solution. For Ilyenkov, too, the divide between ontology and gnoseology should be sublated, not in the totality of the Spirit, as in Hegel, but in human culture, which is a product of human activity. According to Ilyenkov’s doctrine of the ideal, ideality does not exist only “in the head,” in the cognizing subject, but also and predominantly in the forms of material culture, and human consciousness arises as a result of the interiorization of that culture. Thus, on this view the Hegelian identity of thought and being is realized in the process of activity (*dejatel’nost’*) or praxis.¹²

Ilyenkov himself did not discuss *expressis verbis* the question of ontology *vs.* gnoseology. It is possible, even probable, that he avoided toying with such a “hot” subject, because a more in-depth discussion about the relationship between ontology and gnoseology would soon have led to a questioning of the validity of the Leninist theory of reflection. Be it as it may, from Ilyenkov’s articles it is clear that he

¹² This is in itself a very fruitful idea, and one could say that, with this postulate, Ilyenkov has laid the ground for a Marxist theory of culture, a theory that parallels such philosophies of culture of Neo-Kantian origin as Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms.

did not regard the Kantian view as the correct one. Ilyenkov followed Hegel on this question; for him, as for Hegel, gnoseology has no primacy over ontology. Rather, the whole division of philosophy into ontology and gnoseology is sublated in the concept of material practice (and here Ilyenkov, of course, differs from Hegel the objective idealist, for whom the Kantian dualisms are sublated in the Spirit and its activity). Whereas Ilyenkov was silent on the matter, Nelly Motrošilova, who was an ardent supporter of Ilyenkov's ideas in the 1960s, was more outspoken about the position of the Ilyenkovians. She constated in her entry on the word "Ontology" in the *Filosofskaja entsiklopedija* that dialectical materialism has proven "that the problem of ontology did not have and does not have any independent significance, that one should not dwell on the abstract pair of the concepts 'being' and 'thinking'" (Motrošilova 1967, p. 142). After a short discussion and rejection of the ontological ideas of Nicolai Hartmann, Husserl, Heidegger, and others, Motrošilova concludes that "only Marxism" had solved the "real problem" behind ontology, namely "the problem of concrete identity, of the interpenetration of the subjective and objective into social being" (Motrošilova 1967, p. 143). The Marxist solution consisted in showing that this identity lies in the process of human activity. Motrošilova did not refer to Ilyenkov in her text, but she mentions him in her bibliography, and the "solution" of the ontology/gnoseology problem she proposes is unmistakably Ilyenkovian.

To characterize Ilyenkov and his followers as "gnoseologists" is thus misleading. Their actual position is rather Hegelian: the ontology *vs.* gnoseology divide, this vexing product of Kant's Copernican turn, should be eliminated by sublating it into a higher identity. Ironically, Genrikh Batiščev, an erstwhile friend of Ilyenkov, accused him of having drowned human subjectivity in the social substance. According to Batiščev, Ilyenkov had only replaced the Spinozistic substance, conceived as a metaphysical idea of being, with a "social being" which played a similar ontological function in relation to the subject. Therefore, Ilyenkov, who was decried as a "gnoseologist" all his life, was actually an ontologist. I must add, however, that he was not an ontologist in the Wolffian or Deborinian sense, but in the sense of the late Lukács, who, around the same time, i.e., in the 1960s, wrote his *magnum opus* on the ontology of social being and who therein showed leanings towards the new ontology of Nicolai Hartmann. New questions arise from these most interesting connections. But these are the subject matter of another paper.

Acknowledgements Open access funding provided by University of Helsinki including Helsinki University Central Hospital.

Funding The author received no funding for his work on this paper.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval The author confirms that the submitted manuscript is his own work.

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