



Soviet Spinoza: introduction

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The birth of the “Soviet Spinoza” dates back to almost two decades before the October revolution, and its instigator was not a Bolshevik, but Georgi Plekhanov, the foremost representative of the faction in the Russian socialist movement known as Menshevism. In the summer of 1898, he published in *Die Neue Zeit*, the theoretical organ of German Social Democrats, an article “Bernstein und der Materialismus”, which was intended as a polemical intervention into the discussions on how Marx’s legacy should be interpreted.¹ The immediate occasion of Plekhanov’s article was “Comrade Bernstein’s call for a return to Kant” (Plekhanov 1976a, p. 326),² that is, the attempt to interpret the goal of the labour movement or the socialist society as a kind of Kantian transcendental ideal, which can be only indefinitely approached but never fully reached.

However, the issue at stake was larger than that. Plekhanov insisted that the “revisionist” Bernstein, although he had for many years been a close collaborator of Engels, had failed to understand his philosophy and was now trying to replace the Marxist materialism with idealist and agnostic views. If Bernsteinianism would manage to obtain a hegemonic position in the Social Democracy, it would mean the downfall of the worker’s movement as a force able to transform society. In contrast to the “return to Kant” Bernstein was advocating, Plekhanov noted that if one looks for philosophical predecessors of Marxism, they can be found in the materialist tradition, especially in Spinoza and the radical Enlightenment thinkers like Helvétius, Holbach and Diderot.

However, Plekhanov went even further: he constated, that the entire tradition of modern-age materialist philosophy was simply Spinozism. Diderot was a Spinozist, as was Feuerbach, so “with full conviction” Plekhanov asserted that “in the *materialist* period of their development, Marx and Engels never abandoned Spinoza’s point of view” (Plekhanov 1976a, 339). Plekhanov thus seemed to equate “Spinozism” with

¹For an English translation, see Plekhanov 1976a, p. 326 sqq.

²In Plekhanov’s original German text published in *Neue Zeit* it says “Genosse Bernstein”, but for some reason the Soviet editors of the English version rendered it as “Herr Bernstein”.

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a materialist viewpoint in general. He recalled a meeting with old Engels in London in 1889, where they discussed philosophy:

“So do you think”, I asked, “old Spinoza was right when he said that *thought* and *extension* are nothing but two attributes of one and same substance?”
 “Of course”, Engels replied, “old Spinoza was quite right”. (Plekhanov 1976a, 339)³

It is interesting to compare Plekhanov’s opinion with that of Antonio Labriola, his contemporary. The Italian scholar was a figure in many respects similar to Plekhanov: both were immediate continuators and propagators of the theoretical legacy of Marxism in the First International and both stayed in personal contact with Engels. However, in contrast to Plekhanov, Labriola was a professional academic philosopher; for him, the Social Democrat activists discussing philosophy appeared dilettantish. In *Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia* (1898), he wrote contemptuously about the “pretended returns to the philosophers of bygone times”, especially the attempts to connect Spinoza with Marxism were according to him out of line, since Spinoza’s philosophy “does not grasp the movement of history” (Labriola 1976, pp. 729–730 and footnote).⁴

Labriola’s sullen stance towards Plekhanov’s embracement of Spinoza may seem bewildering in the light of the fact that he himself was a Spinoza scholar, who already in 1866 had published a study on Spinoza’s doctrine of passions. Partly, this position may be explained by the fact that according to Labriola, Marxism had already found its own philosophy in the idea of the central role it assigned to human practice – the famous *filosofia della prassi*, a characterisation later adopted by Gramsci. For Labriola, Marxism did not need to borrow elements from other philosophies, be it Kantianism or Spinozism, in order to back up its materialist conception of history. However, even this said, Labriola’s attitude is difficult to explain. Despite his lack of a sense of historicity (which Labriola, admittedly, had right), Spinoza was one of the thinkers of classical modernity that most emphasised the idea of activity. Spinoza’s anthropological doctrine is based on the assumption that individual men, insofar as they are led by reason, are constantly striving to increase their power of acting and that their power of thinking corresponds exactly to their power of acting (the famous equation *agendi potentia = cogitandi potentia*). It is strange that Labriola, who must have known these ideas of Spinoza, did not see any connection between them and the Marxist concept of praxis.

True, the connection of Spinoza’s theory of activity with the Marxist concept of praxis was not seen by Plekhanov, either, nor by most subsequent Soviet philosophers. The first and almost only Soviet thinker who recognised the importance of Spinoza for the Marxist idea of practice was Evald Ilyenkov in the early 1960s.

Among the pre-revolutionary Russian Marxists, Plekhanov’s assessment of Spinoza was not yet the only interpretation favoured by the radical intelligentsia. The Plekhanovian view was challenged by such theoreticians as Aleksandr Bodganov and

³In the English edition, there remains “extent” instead of “extension”. Plekhanov does not mention which language he used when discussing with Engels.

⁴In private letters, Labriola expressed openly hostile views towards Plekhanov, for example in a letter to Bernstein 12. XI. 1898, see Labriola, 995.

Anatoly Lunacharsky, who both presented themselves as Bolsheviks and founded, together with the famous novelist Maksim Gorky, in 1909 a short-lived Party school in Capri. The Marxism of these radical Bolsheviks was, however, of a peculiar kind. It had a clear “leftist” inclination and was inspired by an original theory of human society developed by Bogdanov that he called “tektology” or “General Organisational Science”. This theory drew its philosophical inspiration from the Viennese positivist Ernst Mach. Lunacharsky and Gorky’s contribution to this current consisted mainly of the idea of “God-building” (*bogostroitel’svo*) that tried to give a positive interpretation to the religious feelings of the masses and turn the religion into an incentive for a struggle for social justice. It was mainly Lunacharsky who, starting from the ideas of this movement, attempted to interpret Spinoza as a pantheist who identifies God and matter. Spinoza’s God was thus a contribution to progressive thinking in the service of human emancipation. However, Lenin’s pamphlet *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, published in 1909, crushed these “God-building” interpretations. Interestingly, Lenin allied himself with the Menshevik Plekhanov in order to suppress the “leftist” and subjectivist tendencies in his own Bolshevik faction. Lenin’s philosophical alliance with Plekhanov in 1909 had far-reaching consequences; it explains the strange fact that the subsequent Soviet philosophy was founded mainly on Menshevik tradition and, in its initial phases, developed by intellectuals of Menshevik origin.

In addition to the Machian interpretations of Spinoza by pre-revolutionary Russian Marxists, there was yet another tendency closely attached to it, which might be called vulgar-materialistic. Its chief exponent in the first decade of the twentieth century was Vladimir Shulyatikov (1872–1912), a literature critic and Bolshevik activist. In 1908 he published a book with the title *Opravdanie kapitalizma v zapadnoevropeiskoi filosofii* (The Apology of Capitalism in Western European Philosophy). The main idea of the book was as simple as possible: by demanding “a social and genetic analysis” of the views of the philosophers, he actually reduced them to the class interests they expressed. About Spinoza, Shulyatikov had to say the following:

[W]hen Spinoza died [...], the fine fleur of the Dutch bourgeoisie with great pomp accompanied the hearse that carried his remains. And if we become more closely acquainted with his circle of acquaintances and correspondents, we again meet with the fine fleur of the bourgeoisie – and not only of Holland but of the entire world [...]. The bourgeoisie revered Spinoza, their bard. Spinoza’s conception of the world is the song of triumphant capital, of all-consuming, all-centralising capital. (Shulyatikov 1908, 42)⁵

For Shulyatikov, Spinoza’s doctrine was simply a reflection of the capitalist organisation of the manufacture era production, and Spinoza’s God is but the supreme overseer of the manufacture: “All relations between mind and body are only through God. All relations between the intermediary organisatory links and the organised mass are only with the sanction of the supreme organiser!” (Shulyatikov 1908, p. 37). As the repeated use of the terms “organization” and “organizer” already reveals, Shulyatikov

⁵A photomechanic reproduction of the first edition was published in 2011 by the URSS publishing house, Moscow.

was heavily influenced by Aleksandr Bogdanov, who conceived of his grand social theory, the “Tektology”, as a science of how men during the course of history have “organized” their lives. Shulyatikov’s attempts to apply Bogdanov’s ideas to the history of philosophy was easy prey for both Plekhanov and Lenin, who ridiculed its vulgar reductionism.⁶

The initial variability in defining the character of Spinoza’s philosophy was, however, overcome after the October revolution during the philosophical discussions of the 1920s. As a result, Plekhanov’s interpretation of Spinoza as a forerunner of Marxian materialism became, sealed with the authority of Engels, the prevalent view in Soviet philosophy. In the next three decades, as George L. Kline notes in his 1952 book, “Spinoza has received more attention from Soviet writers than any other pre-Marxian philosopher with the possible exception of Hegel” (Kline 1952, p. 1). It is important to note that the Soviet Marxists were not so much interested in Spinoza as such, but used him as a building block when constructing a line of materialist philosophical heritage leading to Marxism. Spinoza’s doctrine of substance gave rise to interpretations of Marxism as a kind of materialist ontology. Other aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy, the ethics proper and his social theory, were to a large extent neglected by the Soviet philosophers. It is symptomatic that during the 70 years of Soviet rule, no monographs worthy of mention on Spinoza’s political works, the *Tractatus politicus* and *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, were published. The attention was almost entirely fixated on the *Ethics*, and even there, primarily on the first two parts that laid the foundation of Spinoza’s ontology and theory of cognition.

To some degree this is understandable, since the earlier worldwide reception of Spinoza indeed focused on his doctrines of substance and the human mind, whilst ethics and especially his political theory received much less attention. A Marxist renaissance of a Spinoza-inspired political philosophy emerged in the West only in the second half of the twentieth century, starting with the publication of Antonio Negri’s *L’anomalia selvaggia* (The Wild Anomaly) in 1981, and it was quite independent of the Soviet interpretations of Spinoza.

On Deborin’s interpretation of Spinoza

An important role in assessing Spinoza’s significance for Marxist philosophy was played by the journal *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* (Under the Banner of Marxism),⁷ founded in January 1922 on the initiative of Lenin and Trotsky. In the third issue of the journal, published in 1922, Lenin sketched its programmatic tasks. The journal had to lay the theoretical foundations of Bolshevism, but at the same time be able to absorb

⁶Plekhanov asked in his review whether Shulyatikov in fact had intended to write a parody of Marxism (Plekhanov 1976b, p. 305). Lenin’s marginal notes to Shulyatikov were later published in his *Philosophical Notebooks* (Lenin 1973, pp. 484–500) – they are mostly short ironic remarks such as “What nonsense!” and “A misapprehension!”, with the final comment scribbled at the end of the volume: “The entire book is an example of extreme vulgarization of materialism”.

⁷There was a German version, too, *Unter dem Banner des Marxismus*, which, however, was not identical to the Russian one, as it published the original Russian materials only selectively. The German edition was closed down in 1933 after Hitler’s rise to power.

the earlier materialist and atheist traditions: “[W]e still have – and shall undoubtedly have for a fairly long time to come – materialists from the non-communist camp, and it is our absolute duty to enlist all adherents of consistent and militant materialism in the joint work of combating philosophical reaction and the philosophical prejudices of so-called educated society”. On the other hand, old materialism was almost always undialectical, so it was, according to Lenin, necessary to correct the materialist tradition with a dose of Hegelian dialectics: “Taking as our basis Marx’s method of applying materialistically conceived Hegelian dialectics, we can and should elaborate this dialectics from all aspects”. To create a new kind of Marxist theory, free from the opportunism and eclecticism of the Second International, “the editors and contributors of *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* should be a kind of ‘Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics’” (Lenin 1972, pp. 227–236).

Lenin did not mention Spinoza by name in his short text, but it is clear that Spinoza would be included in the materialist tradition that Marxism now should embrace. Indeed, when one reads the discussions of the 1920s, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that Spinoza has played almost as important a role as Hegel in the formation of dialectical materialism. However, the Soviet approach to Spinoza was nevertheless very selective: it focused mainly on the question, in which sense Spinoza’s “materialism” had to be understood. Was it really the same materialism as Marx’s and Lenin’s materialism? An attentive reader of these early debates will see that the antinomies of “Soviet Spinozism” began to take shape at this stage.

In 1927, on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Spinoza’s death, Abram Deborin (1881–1963), the disciple of Plekhanov and chief editor of *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* until his fall in 1930, published two short articles, in which he presented his view on Spinoza’s importance for Marxism. They consisted in much of a recapitulation only of Plekhanov’s views. In a speech delivered at the Communist Academy, Deborin noted that in the then emergent Soviet philosophy, “two ‘fronts’ have been formed in connection with the treatment of Hegelian dialectics and Spinoza’s world-conception: the Hegelian front and the Spinozistic front”. Whilst “the disputes about Hegel touch the foundation of our *method*”, the different opinions on Spinoza concern “our *world-view* and involve the conception of materialism itself” (Deborin 1927; cited in Kline 1952, pp. 91–92). Deborin thus proposed a kind of division of labour for the two potentially greatest predecessors of Marxist philosophy: if Hegel cares for the dialectics, the Marxists can take the materialism from Spinoza. As to Plekhanov’s claim that Marx and Engels were “Spinozists” *sans phrase*, Deborin accepts it without batting an eye. In another short paper from the same year, which he published in the fifth volume of the yearbook *Chronicon Spinozanum*, Deborin was more specific:

According to our deep conviction, Spinozism is not at all an idealistic system; the “Cunning of Reason” of history has brought about that the leading, the most revolutionary and thoroughly *materialist* doctrine of the present days, *Marxism*, is nothing else but a *variety of Spinozism*. Of course, here we speak of Marxism only insofar it is a philosophical world-view [. . .] *The Spinozism of Marx and Engels was, in particular, the newest* [form of] *materialism* [. . .] Vulgar mechanistic materialism forms the reverse side of idealism. It identifies mental processes with physical ones, idealism in turn identifies physical processes with mental, non-material processes. Both mechanical materialism and all kinds of

idealism lead to *monism*, but it is an abstract, metaphysical monism. Spinozism, on the other side, occupies the position of *concrete monism*. Spinoza's substance is a *dialectical unity of opposites*: it is an unity of two [*dvuedina*], as it is at the same time extension and thought, material and spiritual nature. (Deborin 1927, p. 142)⁸

Deborin emphatically turns the attention to the fact that Spinoza's doctrine of substance does not *identify* being and thought, but instead sticks to their *unity*. The distinction may sound scholastic, but actually it is important and by no means only a verbal one. On the contrary, it aptly fixates the great difference between Spinoza and the German idealism (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel). In the latter, the Absolute was understood as an identical subject-object. From this viewpoint both Schelling and Hegel criticised Spinoza, who according to them was not able to comprehend the substance as the "I" (the *Ego*), i.e. as self-consciousness. But this critique was, according to Deborin, unfair. He quotes his master Plekhanov, who had written that

Spinoza's substance, which had two attributes – thinking and extension – had the advantage, that in fact it was the subject-object, the unity of thought and being. To "rise" from substance to self-consciousness, that is to say, to conceive of substance in the manner demanded by as Schelling and Hegel, as the absolute *ego*, as spirit, would have meant reducing it to one of its attributes, namely to thinking. He who reduces everything to thinking is, of course, a monist. But his monism does not solve the problem of the relation of subject to object [...]: it evades its solution, quite arbitrarily deleting one of the conditions of the problem. (Deborin 1927, p. 143; cited in Plekhanov 1976, p. 629)

Plekhanov and Deborin's observation is *prima facie* correct. If we speak of Spinoza's monism, it is monism only at the level of the substance. On the level of the attributes, the Cartesian dualism of thought and extension (thinking and matter) continues. On this "lower" level, we continue to struggle with the problem on which Descartes had already stumbled, namely, how the mind (the subject) can have objective knowledge of the outer world, the world of things that consist of matter conceived as extension. Spinoza's answer was that the dualism between thought and extension is sublated in God as the substance. The Cartesian dualism between a "thinking thing" (*res cogitans*) and an "extended thing" (*res extensa*) disappears if we see them as consisting only of different aspects of one and the same substantial unity. To quote an example that Spinoza himself gives, "a circle existing in the Nature and the idea of an existent circle are one and same thing [...] which is considered under different attributes" (*una eademque est res, quae per diversa attributa explicatur*; *Ethics* II prop. 7 schol.).

However, this Spinozistic solution nevertheless creates a problem for Marxist materialism on which Deborin and Plekhanov do not seem to have reflected sufficiently. For a Marxist, solving the problem of mind–body dualism with a reference to their unity in the substance cannot yet give an exhaustive answer to the question, because it means that the answer is postponed into infinity. According to Spinoza, the unity

⁸The Russian original text in *Chronicon Spinozanum* is followed by a German translation, which, however, is not accurate.

of mind and body does not take place in the level of singular, concrete subjects, but in God only. In the modal world, thinking and extended things have absolutely no commerce. As distinct attributes, thought and extension form two parallel rails, always running separately when one takes a close look and that seem to join only in the distant horizon of the substance. In other words, Spinoza's solution of the Cartesian dualism is a metaphysical one and requires that we constantly recur to the idea of God–Substance.

A further problem arises with Deborin's attitude to Kant. He adhered to Plekhanov's negative evaluation of the influence of Kant in the worker's movement. According to him, thanks to such revisionists as Eduard Bernstein and Conrad Schmidt, "thegnoseological scholasticism and empty formalistic ethics of Kant in fact have become the official philosophical credo of German social democrats" (Deborin 1927, p. 141). This anti-Kantianism leads to a neglect of the importance of Kant's "Copernican revolution". In the foreword to his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously constated that the philosophers should abandon the old metaphysical approach and, before they begin to speculate about the World or the Soul, they should ask themselves which possible limits our faculty of cognition may have. Thus, in Kant thegnoseological (i.e. epistemological) point of view obtained priority in comparison with ontology. This was misinterpreted by the Soviet philosophers as a mere subjectivism – a subjectivism against which they thought that Spinoza would offer a suitable antidote. As a consequence, not only Deborin, but most of the other Soviet philosophers, too, had a tendency to interpret Spinoza's doctrine of substance as a kind of materialist ontology. I shall return to this detrimental train of Soviet thought soon, but first a few words about Spinoza's dialectics.

In his speech at the Communist Academy in 1927, Deborin turned his attention to traits of dialectics in Spinoza's philosophy. For Deborin, the core of Spinoza's dialectics is to be found in the idea of *causa sui*, or the self-causation; his "whole system is contained in this concept in embryonic form" (Deborin 1927, cited in Kline 1953, p. 107). The thought that God or substance does not need any external cause is, according to Deborin, purely materialistic. In stressing the importance of the idea of self-causation, Deborin is not original, since Engels already drew attention to this concept in his *Dialectics of Nature*.⁹ In every case, Deborin's argument seems to be – I say "seems" since Deborin does not constate this expressly – that the *causa sui* is a self-referential structure, which, applied to the received concepts of philosophy, gives them a dialectical character. True, he gives only some examples of how Spinoza "dialecticizes" the traditional philosophical categories. There is a dialectic in Spinoza's concept of Nature or substance, which is absolutely infinite and self-caused. According to Deborin, Spinoza offers further a "remarkably dialectical formulation of the problem of finite and infinite" (Deborin 1927, cited in Kline 1953, p. 108), as he counterposes individual modes and the whole of the universe:

[T]he dialectical meaning of Spinoza's doctrine is that the category applied to a *part* of nature cannot be extended to the *whole of nature*. Each individual

⁹The crucial passage from Engels, quoted by Deborin, reads: "It is to the highest credit of the philosophy of the time that it did not let itself be led astray by the restricted state of contemporary natural knowledge, and that – from Spinoza down to the great French materialists – it insisted on explaining the world from the world itself and left the justification in detail to the natural sciences of the future" (Engels 2010, p. 323).

phenomenon in nature is limited by another and has an external cause, but we cannot say this about nature as a whole. The same thing applies to the concepts of coming into being and passing away. These concepts are applicable, in one way or another, to individual phenomena, but not to the universe as such. (Deborin 1927, cited in Kline 1953, *ibid.*)

Further, the self-referentiality produced by the *causa sui* leads Spinoza to formulate the problem of freedom and necessity in a new manner. He does not set them as absolute contraries, but speaks of a free necessity. He introduces the idea already in the seventh definition of the first part of *Ethics*: “That thing is called free, which exists only by the necessity of its own nature.”

Although Deborin gives only some examples of Spinoza’s dialectical ideas – he tells the reader that he has no time to delve further into the matter – he nevertheless claims that “Hegel in his *Logic* develops Spinoza’s basic ideas with respect to finite and infinite, freedom and necessity. Hegel’s dialectics, in so far as it is concerned with these opposites, represents only a further development and deepening of Spinoza’s dialectical ideas” (Deborin 1927, cited in Kline 1953, p. 108). Thus, Spinoza is for Deborin a direct precursor of Hegelian dialectics. The most important difference is that unlike Hegel, “in Spinoza the body is everywhere first; it has priority, so to speak, over the mind, which is only the idea of the body” (Deborin 1927, in: Kline 1953, 114). Hence, Spinoza is both a dialectician and a materialist – indeed, in Deborin’s interpretation, it is difficult to see any profound differences between Spinoza’s philosophy and Marxism, at least when one considers the ontological and cosmological presuppositions. The pun for Deborin and his school that Spinoza was “Marx without the beard” is not quite unfounded.

Deborin is interested above all in Spinoza’s philosophy of nature. In his *Chronicon Spinozanum* article he approvingly quotes Feuerbach, according to whom “the secret of Spinoza’s philosophy consists of the nature”, and continues:

Nature, the real, material world exists objectively, and human cognition is a reproduction and reflection of the real world in the consciousness of man. In this respect, too, Marxism completely concurs with Spinozism and rejects the idealist and scholastic positions as regards to the modern gnoseological conceptions. (Deborin 1927, cited in Kline 1953, p. 150)

These formulations make it clear that Deborin sees Spinoza’s philosophy as congruent with the Marxian concept of a dialectics of nature in the sense it was presented in Engels’s posthumous work, whose first redaction was published in 1925 in a bilingual German–Russian version with the title *Dialektik der Natur* given by the editors. Deborin relies heavily on Engels in order to prove that Marxism is not only a socio-economic theory but, in addition, a dialectic-materialist philosophy of nature or of the whole world. In this materialistically conceived nature, there exists an objective dialectics and “only thanks to this *objective dialectics*, the *subjective dialectics* is possible” (Deborin 1929, p. 1). In this sense, the dialectical method is “an analogy of the reality”: it reflects on an ideal level the real dialectics of matter (*ibid.*). From this it then follows that “dialectics in a broader sense is a science, which deals with the most *general laws of movement*, which apply both for the nature and the thought, and for human history” (Deborin 1929, p. 2).

Later Soviet philosophy, even in its post-Stalinist phase, never quite managed to shake off this ontological interpretation imposed on Spinoza. There were certainly original and interesting “Soviet Spinozists” such as Lev S. Vygotsky and Evald V. Ilyenkov, and the historian of philosophy Teodor I. Oizerman rightly noted that Spinozism must be considered as a “scandal in metaphysics”, since the content of Spinoza’s ideas are in conflict with the metaphysical crust in which they are enveloped:

The head-on offensive of natural science, materialist in its basis, the philosophical vanguard of which was metaphysical materialism, resolutely hostile to speculative idealist metaphysics, of necessity led to what might be called the Spinoza case or, if you like, a scandal in metaphysics. (Oizerman 1988, p. 170)

Nevertheless, the trend towards “ontologism”, which was one of the distinctive traits of Soviet philosophy (for more on this, see Oittinen 2021), led to a one-sided discussion of the potentialities opened by Spinoza’s philosophical insights. They were evaluated almost exclusively from the viewpoint of how they might contribute to the understanding of dialectics and/or materialism as stipulated by Soviet Marxist philosophy.

An ontological interpretation of Spinoza runs constantly into difficulties, as it has to explain the relationship between thought and extension as attributes of the substance. Deborin’s struggle with the definitions I have quoted above (Spinozism as “concrete monism” which turns to be a “unity of opposites”, etc.) was in this respect symptomatic. Is substance the same as matter in the Leninist sense (the famous definition of which was given in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*), i.e. something independent of the cognising subject? In that case, how can substance be independent of one of its attributes that are its constituting parts? Spinoza’s own definition of the attribute is intriguing: *Per attributum intelligo id, quod intellectus de substantia percipit, tanquam eiusdem essentiam constituens* (By an attribute I mean that which the intellect perceives of the substance as constituting its essence; *Eth.* I def. 2). Here, the attribute in general is defined through one certain modus (the intellect) of one certain attribute (thought)!

The picture becomes much clearer, if we take Spinoza as a follower of Descartes and a philosopher of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. The “secret” of the attributes can then easily be seen in the analytic method applied by Descartes. In his *Méditations*, Descartes famously analysed his sense-impressions of a deliberately chosen object (a piece of wax) and came to the conclusion that the only property of a material object that remains after all the accidental has been removed, is that it has an extension. That is why Spinoza says that the attribute of extension is “what the intellect perceives of the substance as constituting its essence”. The extension in this Cartesian sense is not an ontological property of the substance, but a heuristic viewpoint on which the scientific analysis of the world is based. When the objects of the real world are reduced to points of extension, say x and y , we can study their behaviour (e.g. in analytical geometry). Spinoza’s concept of thought as an attribute is, likewise, the result of a similar “Cartesian reduction”. As he notes in one passage, he does not understand by the modes of thinking (the ideas) anything “like pictures at the eye bottom or in the brain”, but simply “concepts formed by thinking” (*Ethics*

II.48 schol.). Spinoza is, in this respect, more consequent than Descartes and foreshadows Kant's strict separation between the intellectual and the sensual. To interpret Spinoza's attribute of thought as a general property of the matter, as the tendency was in Soviet philosophy,¹⁰ actually means to ontologise the thinking.

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This special block of articles on Soviet reception of Spinoza that is included in the present issue is by no means a complete overview. It would not be difficult to name Soviet scholars who should be dealt with if one plans providing a comprehensive account of Russian Spinoza scholarship. Among those who deserve attentions are many of the participants of the discussion of the 1920s, as well as Vasily V. Sokolov, the editor of the 1957 edition of Spinoza's main works in Russian and perhaps the most important specialist on Spinoza in the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, I believe that the articles published in this collection will give a good survey of such a complex phenomenon as the Soviet Spinoza reception.

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¹⁰As an example, I could mention Vasily's V. Sokolov's comments in his foreword to the 1957 Soviet edition of Spinoza. According to him, the attribute of thought in Spinoza is a form of hylozoism, to which Spinoza recurred because of the "difficulty to explain the origin and the essence of such a most complicated phenomenon of nature as human consciousness" (Sokolov 1957, p. 33). One can, however, question whether it at all was Spinoza's intention to "explain" the emergence of human consciousness. His idea of consciousness was rather a result of the Cartesian analytic reduction, an operation necessary to create the subject-object divide on which modern science rests.

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