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DOCUMENTS FROM THE HISTORY OF SOVIET THOUGHT

SOCIAL BEING AND THE HUMAN ESSENCE: AN  
UNRESOLVED ISSUE IN SOVIET PHILOSOPHY

*A Dialogue with Russian Philosophers Conducted by David  
Bakhurst*

**KEY WORDS:** activity, community, consciousness, human development, Marxism, naturalism, persons, personality, self-consciousness, social being

**ABSTRACT.** This is a transcription of a debate on the concept of a person conducted in Moscow in 1983. David Bakhurst argues that Evald Ilyenkov's social constructivist conception of personhood, founded on Marx's thesis that the human essence is 'the ensemble of social relations', is either false or trivially true. F. T. Mikhailov, V. S. Bibler, V. A. Lektorsky and V. V. Davydov critically assess Bakhurst's arguments, elucidate and contextualize Ilyenkov's views, and defend, in contrasting ways, the claim that human individuals are socially constituted beings. Issues discussed include: the concepts of activity (*dejatel'nost'*) and community (*obščeniija*) and their relevance to the notions of mind and personhood; self-consciousness and its relation to personal identity; naturalism in Soviet thought. Translated from the Russian.

In September 1982, I arrived in Moscow to spend a year exploring the philosophical culture of the Soviet Union. I found it hard to believe that professional philosophy in Russia had been reduced entirely to the stagnant dialectical and historical materialism that represented the public face of Soviet philosophy and the official philosophical 'worldview' of Soviet state ideology. I therefore resolved to work among Soviet philosophers in order to establish how their philosophical culture looked from the inside. It quickly became obvious that Soviet Marxism was by no means monolithic. Among its varieties, I chose to concentrate on a number of critical philosophers of a Hegelian-Marxist persuasion whose work, I felt, deserved scrutiny both for its intrinsic merits and for the light it cast on the tortuous history of philosophy in the USSR.

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And among these thinkers, I made the contribution of Evald Ilyenkov (1924–79) my primary focus. My research eventually issued in a book, *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup>

I was fortunate to have excellent contacts among Soviet philosophers. This was largely thanks to my friend Felix Mikhailov, whose engaging and challenging book *The Riddle of the Self*, had first stimulated my interest in Soviet philosophy.<sup>2</sup> I had met Mikhailov in 1980 and he had kindly agreed to help further my research. As a result, many thinkers agreed to talk to me on politically sensitive matters despite the then uncertain consequences of fraternizing with inquisitive foreigners. I resolved not just to conduct interviews as a foreign observer, but to engage my Russian hosts in some serious philosophical discussion. This would, I hoped, help to bridge the gulf between our respective backgrounds in philosophy and permit me to appreciate the perspective of a participant in Soviet debate.

It was obviously essential for me to work in Russian. Since that tongue is not my native language, Mikhailov and I decided I would give some seminars, where I could present a written text, carefully constructed in advance. A small group of interested and sympathetic colleagues would be invited to reply to my talks and their responses recorded on tape so that I could reflect upon them later. The result was a number of stimulating discussions that proved an invaluable resource for my research.

What follows is a transcription, translated into English, of a discussion which took place in March 1983. The topic was the concept of a person in Soviet Marxism. In my paper, I considered Ilyenkov's attempt to develop a theory of personhood by developing Marx's claim that the human essence is 'the ensemble of social relations'. I argued that Ilyenkov's stance is ambiguous between two positions, and that while one of them is false, the other is true but trivial. The principal respondents were, apart from Mikhailov himself, the philosophers V. S. Bibler and V. A. Lektorsky, and the psychologist V. V. Davydov. All were friends and colleagues of Ilyenkov. They listened with courtesy to my criticisms, which they interpreted very generously, and proceeded to give considered and illuminating replies. (A number of other people

attended some or all of the discussion and made occasional contributions, which are attributed in the text to 'Another'.)

Twelve years have passed since the discussion took place. The Soviet Union is no more and Soviet philosophy a thing of the past. Nevertheless, the transcription of the debate remains of interest. First, the text is of documentary significance. Philosophy in the Soviet Union was to a significant degree sustained in an oral culture. The published literature is thus only a partial record of Soviet philosophy and often cannot be properly appreciated without an understanding of background debates that may have never fully emerged in print. Despite this, there are few (if any) detailed records of Soviet philosophers in debate. This text helps convey something of the style of oral philosophizing of one group of thinkers working within the orbit of broadly Marxist conceptions. It also reveals the humanity and charm with which these philosophers engage with ideas.

Second, it is to be hoped that Western readers will find the substance of the discussion philosophically interesting in its own right. The past fifteen years have seen a growing interest in the West – stimulated by communitarianism, feminism, post-modernism and other schools – in social constructivist views in general, and in the social constitution of 'persons' and 'selves' in particular. In addition, the participants all work within traditions of Russian thought which have recently had some influence in the West. The discussion invokes activity theory and Vygotsky's socio-historical psychology, and the influence of Bakhtin's dialogism and his concept of 'answerability' is plain to see.

A note on the participants. Vasili Davydov is a prominent educational psychologist in the Vygotskian tradition, who made his reputation with some significant work on generalization in learning.<sup>3</sup> In the Spring of 1983, he was Director of the Institute of General and Pedagogical Psychology in Moscow, where the present discussion was staged. Davydov had established a theoretical 'laboratory' at the Institute to which he had brought Mikhailov and Vladimir Bibler, whose influential book, *Myšlenie kak tvorčestvo*, had been published in 1975.<sup>4</sup> Also members of the laboratory were A. S. Arsen'ev and G. P. Shchedrovitsky. Shortly after the seminar took place, Davydov was ousted as Director of the Institute and the theoretical laboratory dissolved. Mikhailov

moved to the Institute of Philosophy; he published *Obščestvennoe soznanie i samosoznanie individa* in 1990.<sup>5</sup> Bibler retired from professional academe, but continued to pursue his philosophical concerns, producing in 1991, *Ot naukoučeniya-k logike kul'tury*, a substantial book which develops further his idea of the 'philosophical logic of culture'.<sup>6</sup> His work has attracted quite a following. In 1983, Vladislav Lektorsky was Head of the Department of the Theory of Knowledge at Moscow's Institute of Philosophy, a position he continues to hold. In 1988, he became editor of *Voprosy filosofii*. He is author of a significant book on epistemology, *Sub"ekt, ob"ekt, poznanie*, which seeks to develop a Marxist epistemology in critical dialogue with Western schools. The book appeared in translation in 1984.<sup>7</sup> As the political climate changed under *glasnost* and *perestrojka*, so the cloud over Davydov dissipated. He published *Problemy razvivajuščego obučeniya* in 1986, was elevated to academician, and eventually returned to direct the Institute of General and Pedagogical Psychology.<sup>8</sup>

The discussion proved difficult to render into English. My argument against Ilyenkov trades on the idea that the Russian term '*ličnost*' is ambiguous between what in English is expressed by the words 'person' and 'personality'. The easiest option would have been simply to use the Russian term, but this created an awkwardness of style at odds with the fluency of my respondents' arguments. I therefore decided to translate '*ličnost*' in different ways according to context (e.g. 'person', 'personhood' and 'personality'), taking care, however, that these contrasting translations do not accentuate the suggestion of ambiguity, or obscure my argument. Similarly, I have translated the difficult concept of *obščenie* variously, sometimes as 'community', sometimes as 'communion with others'; and the adjective *predmetnyj*, I have rendered as 'object-oriented', 'objective', or 'reified', according to context. I have tried to make the text as 'gender-neutral' as possible, switching between masculine and feminine pronouns and avoiding the general noun 'man', though unfortunately English does not have a term as apt as the Russian '*čelovek*' with its rich etymological associations.

The actual seminar ran over two days. I have collapsed the two discussions into one, and deleted the inevitable repetitions and recapitulations. Apart from this, very little editing was required to produce a

polished text, a testimony to the oratorical skills of the Russian participants. Nevertheless, since failures of understanding, either linguistic or conceptual, may have affected my rendition of events, the text is best viewed as my reconstruction of the debate, rather than as a verbatim report. In addition, it should be stressed that the responses were made spontaneously, and should not be taken as representative of the participants' views either before or since the discussion itself. Moreover, as with all conversation, the participants may have said things that subsequent reflection would have led them to withdraw. As for the arguments I presented, they were offered in the spirit of 'devil's advocate'. However, as my respondents detected, I couldn't have played this role unless I had felt, as it were, a certain sympathy for the devil. I admit this with some chagrin, since I now find my former tolerance of such arguments disconcerting.

Whatever else this text may be, it represents some pleasant hours, well spent, in philosophical discussion among friends. I hope above all that the translation conveys the good-natured enthusiasm which characterized this debate.

**Bakhurst:** In the sixth of the 'Theses on Feuerbach', Marx writes that "The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations."<sup>9</sup> Here are three quotations from Evald Ilyenkov's well-known article 'Čto že takoe ličnost?' in which he applies Marx's idea to the concept of personhood:

Personhood *in general* is the particular (*ediničnoe*) expression of the life-activity of the whole 'ensemble of social relations'. A *given* person is a particular expression of a necessarily restricted sum of these relations (not of all) by which he or she is directly connected with other individuals (with some and not with all) – that is, with the 'organs' of the 'body' of the community, the body of humanity.<sup>10</sup>

Marxist logic does not locate the 'essence' of separate individuals in their abstract similarity, but, on the contrary, in a concrete totality (*sovokupnost'*), in the 'body' of the real ensemble of their mutual relations, mediated in various ways by things. The 'existence' of each separate individual is understood not as the concrete 'instantiation' of an abstract 'essence' but, quite the reverse, as an abstract and partial realization of a concrete essence, as a fragment of this essence, as its phenomenon (*javlenie*), as an incomplete and therefore inadequate (*neadekvatnyy*) embodiment of this essence in the organic body of each individual. Here personhood is understood along completely

materialist lines as something quite substantial and corporeal (*veščestvenno-telesno*), as the real, corporeal-substantial totality of substantial-corporeal relations connecting a given individual with other such individuals by cultural-historical and not natural (*estestvenno-prirodnyj*) bonds.<sup>11</sup>

In the body of an individual, personhood fulfils and realizes itself as a social form (*obrazovanie*) ('essence') which is in principle quite distinct from the body or the brain. What it is exactly is the totality (ensemble) of real, sensuous, object-orientated (*predmetnyj*) relations of a given individual to another individual (or individuals) mediated by things.<sup>12</sup>

Ilyenkov's article makes clear that he takes this view of personhood to have quite general significance. Here, at one fell swoop, is the core of a solution to questions about the nature of the self and self-consciousness, the character of self-knowledge, the development of individuality and the emergence of cultural identity.

There are grounds for scepticism, however, about whether the idea of the human essence as the 'ensemble of social relations' is as explanatory as Ilyenkov supposes. One significant problem is that the Russian term '*ličnost*' , as Ilyenkov uses it, appears to be ambiguous between what in English is denoted by the terms 'person' and 'personality' respectively. As a result, Ilyenkov sometimes seems to conflate metaphysical questions about the nature of persons with psychological and moral questions about the nature of personality. On the one hand, he is concerned with the self as the subject of thought and experience, the criteria of personal identity, and so on. These issues do indeed pertain to the 'essence' of personhood, since they concern those characteristics a being must possess to qualify as a person and to remain the *same* person over time. On the other hand, however, Ilyenkov discusses how human *personality* flourishes or atrophies under certain conditions, and considers the circumstances in which human beings become self-critical individuals in contrast to conformists and self-deceivers. Such issues concern the scope and limits of human *character*, and, while interesting and important, they do not seem to bear on the essence of personhood as such. We understand perfectly well that Felix Mikhailov does not have his particular personality by *necessity*: Felix would have been no less a person had he been moody and foolish in contrast to sweet-tempered and talented.

Thus, in my view, Ilyenkov is trying to answer two distinct sets of questions at once. As a result, conceptual issues about the concept of a person are mixed up with broadly empirical questions about the development of character and personality. In consequence, it is unclear whether Ilyenkov is advancing (1) the *strong* thesis that *identifies* the essence of personhood with the ensemble of social relations, or (2) the *weak* thesis that personality and individuality are *shaped* by social interaction.

Ilyenkov's argument often trades on this unclarity. For example, he suggests that it is possible for a being who possesses personhood to lose it under certain conditions. He writes:

The death of the person (*ličnost' naja smert'*) not infrequently takes place much earlier than the physical demise of some human being, and the former person, having become a motionless mummy, can bring more grief to people than a natural death.<sup>13</sup>

How is this to be understood? Is Ilyenkov really saying that someone may literally cease to be a person, that she may, as it were, lose her very self? Or is Ilyenkov speaking metaphorically? Is he saying what we all say when we complain that *činovniki* (petty bureaucrats) are not real persons; that is, when we give metaphorical expression to the familiar thought that *činovniki* possess no great individuality or character, that they operate more like machines than human beings, and so on? Whichever it is, Ilyenkov's position is in trouble. For while the literal reading (i.e. the strong thesis) looks impossible to defend, the metaphorical (i.e. weak) reading merely expresses an uncontroversial truth, which is philosophically uninteresting. Ilyenkov's position is thus either false or trivially true.

The same dilemma haunts Ilyenkov's discussion of Alexandr Suvorov's response to the question 'Where does personhood exist?'. Ilyenkov quotes Suvorov, one of the blind-deaf pupils of educationalist Alexandr Meshcheryakov:

Where am I? Not here (touching forehead) and not here (pointing to chest) . . . Ah, I understand: I am in the sum of my relations with friends . . . and with enemies too. In the totality of my relations with other people, that is where.<sup>14</sup>

Ilyenkov enthusiastically endorses Suvorov's remark. But, again, how is it to be understood? If we are talking about a person's character or



personality, and only metaphorically about the person as such, then Suvorov's answer is not really all that remarkable. However, if we take ourselves literally to be describing the location of the person, then the thesis looks obviously false. So once again, Ilyenkov's position appears to be either trivially true, or false.

This problem applies quite generally to the strong and weak theses set out above. The position that the essence of personhood is the ensemble of social relations looks false, and the view that personality is formed in social interaction is a banal and uncontentious thought.

Ilyenkov's article contains an intense discussion of the relation of personhood and self-consciousness (*samosoznanie*). He treats Descartes' and Fichte's ideas of self-consciousness as an ideal relation of the subject to itself, as an exclusively mental phenomenon exhibited in the act of 'introspection' (*introspekcija*). According to Ilyenkov, Descartes and Fichte take this special relation of the subject to itself to be central to the concepts of self and person. For them, personhood exists in the form of the self-consciousness of particular individuals (*ediničnoe samosoznanie*). Now, it is quite clear that Descartes' treatment of self-consciousness, in so far as it is relevant to questions of personhood, is entirely metaphysical in orientation: self-consciousness is portrayed as central to the self as a subject of thought, a primary characteristic of the 'I' that thinks and therefore is. Although there is a sense in which, for Descartes, each of us has special knowledge of the contents of our minds, it certainly doesn't follow that each individual has transparent knowledge of the nature of his own character or personality. A being self-conscious in Descartes' sense might understand itself very badly. Ilyenkov, however, proceeds to argue against Descartes' invocation of self-consciousness by arguing that people are often poor judges of their own personalities:

One need not be very well acquainted with psychology to understand that the nature of an individual's personhood (*ličnost'*) in no way coincides with what she says and thinks about herself, with her self-opinion, self-awareness, or verbal self-evaluation, however sincere.<sup>15</sup>

Ilyenkov makes this futile argument because he slides from considerations about self-consciousness as the subject's pure introspective awareness of its own mental states, which is Descartes' focus, to a

much richer conception of self-consciousness as self-knowledge or self-understanding, which has nothing to do with Descartes' claims. Once again, metaphysical issues about persons as selves or subjects of thought are conflated with psychological issues about the nature of character and personality.

Ilyenkov's treatment of self-consciousness is strangely ahistorical. He invokes a number of thinkers – Descartes, Fichte, Sartre, Freud, behaviourists, cyberneticians – and writes as if their respective discussions of self-consciousness are all really discussions of the same thing. This is surprising for a philosopher like Ilyenkov, whose Hegelian intuitions usually lead him to emphasize how philosophical conceptions, as products of a complex historically evolving dialectic, need to be properly contextualized if we are to understand them aright.

But maybe I'm the one who is guilty of being insufficiently historical. Perhaps my background in Anglo-American philosophy makes it hard for me to see the point of Ilyenkov's remarks and my supposed efforts at conceptual clarification are really only expressions of confusion. It might be suggested, for example, that there is no sharp distinction between metaphysical questions about persons and psychological issues about the nature of personality, and hence the supposed ambiguity I find in Ilyenkov's discussion is merely an artifact of my own misunderstanding. So let me offer a thought experiment, adapted from the work of Bernard Williams, designed to illustrate why I think there are genuine metaphysical questions about the identity of persons which Ilyenkov's 'strong thesis' simply fails to address.<sup>16</sup>

Suppose that Felix and I fall into the clutches of a mad scientist, endowed with all kinds of space-age Soviet technology, who wants to carry out the following experiment. First, he plans to hook Felix and myself up to a computer which will record the information stored in our respective brains. Then he will 'erase' the information in our brains: Felix and I will have total amnesia. After this, the scientist will exchange my brain for Felix's and vice versa; that is, he will put my brain in Felix's body and Felix's brain in my body. The computer will then endow Felix's brain with my memories and character, and Felix's memories and character will be given to mine. So, in one place we shall have what is now Felix's body, with my brain, but Felix's character and

memories. And in another place we will have what is now my body with Felix's brain but my memories and character. Who will be who? Clearly, it is not all that easy to say. It is tempting, of course, simply to dismiss this as a pseudo-problem. Surely we cannot say in advance what the outcome of such an experiment will be. Perhaps we should declare that there is no determinate answer to the question of who is who.

However, imagine that the scientist tells us that after the operation he will reward one of his guinea-pigs with \$100,000 and torture the other. Suppose further that he asks me, as one of the unlucky participants, to decide which body should receive the money and which be tortured after the operation. Now, to me at least, the thought that there is no determinate answer to the question of identity in this case looks much less plausible. One and only one question stands before the guinea-pig in this situation: When the lights go on after the operation will I be the subject of consciousness of the body which is going to be tortured? Will I be looking out of the eyes that see the money or the knife? To put it bluntly, the question is: Will it hurt?

Now, were I not so personally involved in this nasty business, I would seek the advice of a sympathetic philosopher like Felix. But what can he, as a Marxist, committed to the 'Sixth Thesis', tell me? If I were to ask advice of a philosopher who holds that the identity of a person over time depends on the continued existence of his or her brain, then I would receive a determinate answer, for since my brain will be in Felix's body, this philosopher will have to say that I will have a new body with a new character and new memories to go with it. And if I consult a philosopher who holds that memory continuity is the key to personal identity, then he will advise me that after the operation I shall have a new brain. A behaviourist would also have an answer up her sleeve. She would say that, despite the physical changes, nothing will happen to the people involved in the operation. But if a Marxist tells me that I must go back to the classics and solve the problem on the basis of the 'Sixth Thesis' then it seems obvious that this is no help at all. The Marxist just gives the wrong kind of answer.

The ineptitude of the Marxist thesis in the face of enduring metaphysical questions about personal identity refutes Ilyenkov's claim that Marxism offers a quite general answer to questions about the human

essence. The strong thesis is just false. If the Marxist retreats to the weak thesis and argues that the 'Sixth Thesis' bears only on questions of the development of human personality, then there is a danger his or her position will reduce to no more than the familiar platitude that human beings develop through interaction with other people and the character of that development is influenced, sometimes profoundly, by the social circumstances of their lives.

Let me conclude by mentioning one area where Soviet views of the human essence as 'the ensemble of social relations' seem particularly weak. This is the problem of death. Soviet philosophers are wont to say that there is a sense in which human beings can survive their own deaths, for through her life-activity the individual puts her very life into the world. She takes part in the creation of the very sphere of social relations that represents her essence as a human being. And this contribution survives her own physical death. This 'solution' to the problem of immortality is often presented in optimistic spirit.

Now, maybe I am missing the point, but when a person, suffering terribly in the face of death, asks herself whether she will survive her death, no appeal to the 'Sixth Thesis' will satisfy her. She would surely feel that, once again, the Marxist answer speaks to a different question from the one she is putting. Her question is: Will I continue to exist as a subject of consciousness after my death? Will I be capable of some kind of agency? According to Soviet Marxism, I neither survive as consciousness nor as agent, but only as a fossilized contribution to human history over which I can exercise no control. This is a chilling vision of survival.

I have argued that Ilyenkov's account of the 'human essence' is either false or vacuous. Soviet Marxists must either take full metaphysical responsibility for the claim that personhood is constituted by social relations, or recognize that their position amounts to a collection of platitudes.

**Mikhailov:** Let me begin with a few remarks about the status of David's paper. In my view, we shouldn't treat David's words simply as a critique, by one particular representative of a foreign philosophical tradition, of one particular article published in the USSR. David's paper raises a number of cardinal, even painful, questions we are forced to

face not just in confrontation with Anglo-American philosophy, but also in arguments here at home. I remember how, at a seminar at this Institute, a prominent psychologist gave a paper on personhood (a subject, of course, constantly under discussion) in which he said the following (although he has no relation to analytic philosophy whatsoever!): “Comrades! Listen! You’re always telling us the human essence is the ensemble of social relations. But I’m a *psychologist*, and as such I am concerned with questions about the character of the individual, the explanation of behaviour, and so on. I’m trying, as it were, to define the structure of individuality. What do you offer me in the idea that the human essence is the ensemble of social relations? A general definition of *homo sapiens*; a general answer to the question: What are human beings? Well, taken in that spirit, I agree. Human beings are the ensemble of social relations! Human beings are historically developing beings! Human beings are the culturo-historical environment! But while such definitions are the stuff of philosophical seminars, where I can assent to them with a clear conscience, they don’t help me investigate what interests me as an empirical psychologist. I simply cannot *work* with such definitions.” In this we see that, for psychologists, questions of the human essence become questions about the unique, subjective, unrepeatable, individual existence of the individual. Forgive this tautologous formulation, but it’s important to emphasize that psychologists typically see problems of the self as problems of the immediate reality of here-and-now-unfolding subjective Being. That’s what interests them, that’s what they want to focus on.

Now, I agree wholeheartedly with David that personhood *is* intrinsically bound up with the nature of self-consciousness, or what one might call ‘reflexion’, with the empirical fact – expressed in the thought experiment and in the discussion of ‘life after life’ – of subjective Being, which so captivates psychologists, empiricists, and indeed, writers, artists, and any thinking person at any time. And, in our version of Marxism, this real fact must stand at centre stage. Thus, in my view, the issue is how we can create one approach (and not fall between two, ‘weak’ and ‘strong’) which addresses *both* metaphysical questions of the coming into being, development, and the determination of the stream of subjective Being which holds so great a fascination for us, *and* questions about the real-

ization of the most natural and empirical dimensions of the existence of every human being.

This is especially pressing, because in our work with psychologists the discussion always boils down to this: "Be concrete," they say, "We're talking (e.g.) about how the schoolpupil's developing ability (*umenie*) to solve tasks becomes the foundation of the emergence of her creative capacities (*sposobnosti*). But to define the concept of a 'capacity', it's no use lurking in the misty abstraction of the 'ensemble of social relations.'" Likewise, naturalistic philosophers, like David Dubrovsky, chide us in the following way: "While you study the 'material development of history', claiming that the human essence is the ensemble of social relations, and so on, I seek a more concrete approach to human beings in science, physiology, medicine, etc. I argue that a human being's brain works in such-and-such a way and therefore he understands so-and-so. But if you tell me that his understanding, or failure to understand, is connected with whether he has come into contact with clever or stupid people, then that's just *banal*. Such matters pertain to the development of the essence in the external world, but I want to define that essence itself." And therefore the naturalist doesn't see that essence for what it is. It's not that the naturalist is a fool (I use that undiplomatic expression for the sake of brevity), it's that *we* have not done enough. It is still possible to sail blindly past a proper understanding of Marx's insight. We have not brought this insight face to face with the real issues.

**Bibler:** Or to put it another way, we have not faced up to the metaphysical responsibility that the 'Sixth Thesis' forces upon us.

**Mikhailov:** Quite so. Thus this is the beginning of a conversation about how far this responsibility has been discharged in our works. About what has been achieved and what remains undone. We must identify places where we start to repeat ourselves like a record stuck in the groove.

I want to emphasize that, in my view, the issue here is about a clash of two approaches, two logics. David, in analytic style, urges us not to mix up two sets of questions. But in our tradition, when we make a division between two spheres, the next step is *identification*. We must seek to understand the cause of the split: whether it's logical or historical. In this case, we must ask how a division into, on the one hand,

purely metaphysical and, on the other, strictly empirical questions is *possible*. And in our tradition, we must seek a *third* in which neither (A) the metaphysical serves as the basis for the solution of empirical problems, nor (B) the empirical forms the foundation for generalizations masquerading as philosophical truths. The naturalist takes course (B). He wants to define the human essence by considering all the various empirical manifestations of human behaviour, physiology, information processing, and so on. Advocates of course (A), which one could call 'quasi-' or 'feeble-Hegelian' (it's a parody of a truly Hegelian perspective), hold that we can establish general laws of reality – nature, thought, and society – and we may bravely assert that any empirical phenomenon is just a realization of those laws. All that remains is to provide a justification in the given instance. It was from this perspective that one of our philosophers said that all scientists are like Molière's character who was told that he'd spoken in prose all his life though he never realized it. Scientists are really all dialecticians. They really all profoundly understand that the quantitative is transformed into the qualitative and so on. They put the laws of the dialectic to work all the time, but they don't know they're doing it. On this view, it's our job as philosophers to say, "Hey gang, when you're doing an experiment and you notice that after certain quantitative changes there occurs a qualitative change, don't forget that Hegel knew about this too and that Marx also wasn't against this sort of thing." I want to suggest that these two approaches – naturalist-empiricist and quasi-Hegelian – are identical in logical structure; they're two sides of the same coin. Either we prop up the empirical conception of the person with general concepts that, as it were, decide everything in advance, or we try to draw out the general concepts from the empirical facts. This split manifests itself in other ways too. On the one hand we talk about 'humanity', and on the other, humanity steps aside and there remain people, individuals. And this is not just a logical contrast between universal and particular concepts: it's easy, for example, to love humanity, but it's difficult to love each individual. Devilishly difficult. (That, of course, is an old thought. We need only mention Dostoevsky.)

So, in my view, David's paper does not just set two national schools at odds with one another, or counterpose two distinct class approaches

(though this may not be entirely irrelevant). In the final analysis, the real tension is between two *logics*, two methods, two ways of looking at any phenomenon placed before us. The clash is between, on the one hand, the one-dimensional logic of naturalism and quasi-Hegelianism, and on the other, the genuinely dialectical logic of our own tradition in which humankind and human beings, community and individual, essence and particular, are seen to exist somehow as *one* subject.

I'll return to these themes later.

**Bibler:** I have a number of detailed observations to make, but for now I'll restrict myself to three points to clarify how I understand David's contribution.

First, in my opinion, we shouldn't see David as simply rehearsing well-trodden moves from the perspective of a particular tradition. The paper clearly expresses some of his own doubts and reflections at a certain stage in his philosophical development. His central point concerns the implicit ambiguity he finds in the assertion that the human essence is the ensemble of social relations, and his principal thought is that without critique, deepening and development, the thesis turns out to be impeccable, since it confuses two distinct assertions of different logical forms: strong and weak. And actually, candidly speaking, in the majority of our work, when we assert that the human essence is the ensemble of social relations, we immediately begin to retreat in the face of rather insignificant challenges. We worry that we can't say straight out that the human essence is the ensemble of social relations, because every person nevertheless changes in those relations, he relates them to himself and, in turn, changes them. He is not simply a manifestation of those relations. If that were so, personhood would simply be a manifestation of an essence existing in (as Ilyenkov has it) 'corporeal-substantial' form as 'corporeal-substantial relations' (this would make personhood more corporeal than even *value*, Ilyenkov's paradigmatic example of an ideal phenomenon that transcends the substantial-corporeal). Moreover, we're nervous about asserting that a person is the ensemble of social relations because of course it's also true that the ensemble of social relations is society itself. It looks like we have a choice between two supposed definitions: (1) Society is the ensemble of social relations (2) A person is the ensemble of social relations. And if we can't keep them



apart our opponents will ridicule us: “So, persons and society are the same?! What, my dear Marxists, are you talking about? Are you saying that the individual and society are two peas in a pod? After all, you just exchanged the one term for the other!” Faced with this prospect, we weaken our thesis. “Look,” we reply, “We’re not metaphysicians! We don’t want you to take us *literally*. Clearly persons and society are not identical. We don’t want to overdo the ‘is’ in the thesis that a person is the ensemble of social relations. We really just meant that a human being lives in society, she acts in one way or another in that society and in the course of her life, her personality takes shape as a result of her interaction with the ensemble of social relations.” But now we are asked, not only by analytic philosophers but also by our own Soviet philosophers of an analytical bent, “Takes shape? What sort of ‘taking shape’ do you have in mind? This now looks like a story about how personality emerges. You have swapped the initial question for another. At best, you’re confusing considerations about the emergence of personhood with the definition of its essence. Does the genesis of something define its essence? Obviously not! There’s a gap here. Whatever the influence of the ensemble of social relations, it is acting upon *something*.” So when we advance the strong thesis, pretending to be daring, we soon run for cover in the weak thesis when it’s demanded we take full metaphysical responsibility for the identity of personhood and the ensemble of social relations. But the weak thesis risks banality.

Taking up David’s challenge, I shall not enter into a crude polemic with analytic philosophers, but rather, I want to account for the objections they raise and to assimilate their thoughts into my own logical plan. When I say that personhood arises in the course of social life, then this is a strange, paradoxical combination of the strong and weak variants. Personhood emerges, or better, *arises* only through the action of society, of social relations, on the individual, but it arises as something *irreducible* to that determination by society, as something present only in the individual, quite irreducible to the sum of those interactions from which it emerged. Thus, the strong thesis enters on the back of the weak, and by its sheer strength overshadows the weak and makes it look trivial.

Second, David rightly gestured at the background to the debate. I want to add that I don't think that it's proper to identify the Marxist conception of personhood with the views advanced in Ilyenkov's '*Čto že takoe ličnost?*'. Of course, it's unimportant whether the view represented by Mikhailov, Lektorsky, Davydov or Bibler is truly *Marxist*. But it's worth pointing out that in this article Ilyenkov does not do justice to his *own* view, to that part of his position which *is* distinctively Marxist. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx said we should never look at human beings simply as the totality of social relations; human beings create those relations and can never be reduced to their influence. This thought, so central to Ilyenkov's philosophical credo, is not sufficiently prominent in this article. Well, I shall not go on about what exactly Marx had in mind, or else we'll get bogged down in tiresome matters of interpretation. I shall restrict myself to Ilyenkov's article in which the central questions are posed very sharply, giving rise to problems which we must solve if we are to proceed. Thus, what I shall say later will be, to an extent, a critique of Ilyenkov, in conjunction with David's own, based on the idea that these problems can be solved in the tradition of the 'High Rationalism' of Hegel and Marx, properly understood. David's paper poses problems from within this tradition, and certainly highlights deficiencies in our position. We will not get very far as Marxists if we criticize at worst Soviet naturalists and at best Descartes. We are Marxists if we are able to criticize ourselves and develop our position by so doing. We must not simply hold up a big stick, moreover one wielded by the state, to beat down traditions which think differently. That is just cheap. We should never even think of such things.

Finally, David is not simply expressing the views of analytic philosophers, nor is he simply giving us *his* views. The point is that two or three central arguments in the paper militate against reducing the problem of the self, of subjective Being – that distinctive view of the world 'from within' of each individual subject – to a pseudo-problem. David is out to reveal the genuinely metaphysical character of the problem. David's style is analytic, but his criticism is really made from the tradition of High Rationalism, albeit in its most Cartesian form. You, David, reveal the reality of the problem and claim that we lack the metaphysical bite to

chew on it. That doesn't sound like the words of an analytic philosopher to me.

**Mikhailov:** Let me make one further point about the relevance of David's paper. We mustn't lose sight of the fact that Ilyenkov's article was written in response to certain concrete philosophical tendencies at work in this country. It is by no means a final statement of an encyclopedic type: "This is the problem of *ličnost*' and Marxists believe such-and-such . . ." The article is bold, lively, and it has its addressees. If Evald were here today he would urge us to see the piece in the light of a particular controversy. I have in mind not just the fight against naturalism, but a broader battle against the whole logic of 'socio-biological' dualism. This dualism forces us into the following dilemma. *Either* individuality is connected with a certain property (which we might define as 'mind' or 'psyche' or some such, or perhaps we might choose not to define it), and a human being is thought to enter the world with this 'X' which already has a specific form. She enters the world already as *that which must develop*, and the process of individualization is played out in purely quantitative changes, by degree. Admittedly, there emerge qualities which were not there previously, but the explanation of their emergence takes us back to this 'X'. The main thing is that the subject enters the world as an unrepeatable individual. *Or* the individual is thought to enter the world as a kind of blank, like this freshly minted five kopek piece. The features this coin acquires, which will differentiate it from others, depend on who uses it. All the scratches and erosion are a product of external, social factors. Here the ensemble of social relations does its work. It leads that faceless blank to unrepeatable individuality. These two positions represent *one* logic, the logic of socio-biological dualism. Neither alternative suits me at all, whether in Leontiev's or Rubinshtein's versions (or the version of those contemporary psychologists who claim to be following Rubinshtein, though they are really a long way from that). If we say, as Ilyenkov seems to, that from within *nothing* emerges, then on this logic our view reduces to the banality that each individual differs from others because she was lucky enough to meet A and not B: in these meetings lies her individuality. But this is absurd. Personhood hardly warrants 'stratigraphical' treatment. We recoil from innatism and adopt a view which portrays personhood as

acquired in an entirely *external* form. And thus we lose the subject's particular distinctive view on the world that is the key to his or her individuality. Well, it is either one view or the other ... or perhaps, there's room for the impossible 'third'. A question of great significance to which I shall return.

**Lektorsky:** Let me begin with David's claim that the Russian word '*ličnost*' is ambiguous between, as the English has it, 'person' and 'personality'. He argues that while we may take the Marxist thesis that the human essence is the ensemble of social relations to mean that our personality, or individuality, is formed in the process of our interrelations with others, this fails to speak to questions about the essence of personhood as such. It is clear from what David goes on to say that he takes the essence of the person to be connected with self-consciousness, or the capacity for 'introspection'. Here he invokes Descartes, and also the analytic tradition. This appeal to analytic philosophy strikes me as odd, for this tradition contains many philosophers who see things very differently from David. Indeed, analytic philosophers have, to a far greater degree than Marxists, written off these questions as pseudo-problems. Ryle, for instance, holds that the 'self' is a fiction. So, it is not we Marxists who are dismissing the problem. The dismissal paradoxically comes from within the very tradition in the name of which David reasserts the relevance of the problem.

David's paper is certainly reminiscent of certain writers of the past. Fichte, for example, draws a dichotomy between the 'pure self' and the empirical self or individuality. Where the latter is formed and develops in the actual world – in processes of interaction and interrelation – the analysis of the pure 'I', pure consciousness, pure ego, pure *essence*, leads us simply to self-consciousness. Such dichotomizing dominated philosophy for some time. It is not characteristic of contemporary analytic schools, nor, indeed, of contemporary existentialism. But in the 'old philosophical tradition', it was common to draw a fundamental distinction between pure and empirical selves, and I think David is heir to this tradition.

David claims that the strong interpretation of the Marxist thesis is indefensible and that the weak is banal. Against this I want to stress that Marx's approach is by no means trivial. For Marx, the influence

of the totality of social relations on a human being makes that being whatever he or she becomes. Thus its influence is far from trivial. Indeed, Marx's distinctive contribution to philosophy consists precisely in the 'detrivialization' of the status of our social being. It is question-begging to assert the triviality of Marx's position from the point of view of the very tradition from which he is seeking to break away. For me, the crux of Marx's position is precisely the idea that the most essential characteristics of persons cannot be understood without reference to the relations *between* people, for without these relations a person does not develop. By this, I mean, not that persons do not *flourish* outside social relations, but that they do not *come into being*. This is not a trivial claim, but one with far-reaching consequences, not just for the given questions but also for more concrete issues, especially in psychology. The self, for example, is not treated as an object, as a kind of substance to which one might point and which is from the outset open to introspection and self-consciousness. Rather, the self is seen as a system of relations between myself and others. Outside of this system of relations, I simply cannot exist. I am, by my nature, a *dialogical* essence. My self cannot form or function outside mutual relations, outside an *exchange* of relations between myself and others. This approach gives rise to a whole range of questions which simply did not exist for Descartes or Fichte (they begin to emerge with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*). There is the problem of my Being-for-others, my Being-for-myself and the Being-of-others-for-me. There's the question of the nature of object-orientated activity and its role in the development of the self. And there's the problem of 'reflexion'; that is, of meditative contemplation, of thought directed inward. This relates to that peculiar feature of self-consciousness we call 'introspection', which plays so great a role for Descartes and Fichte. In my view, introspection should not be conceived as a relation of someone to something purely *inside* him- or herself, but as a special way of relating oneself to others. Introspection is really '*extra*-spection'. A human being always lives on the boundary between self and other. These are serious themes which demand serious treatment. Here, I mean only to indicate that the Marxist approach to questions of personhood and self-consciousness is fundamentally different from the classical early modern approach to the subject. I don't mean to suggest that Marxists

have all these problems solved. But I do want to say that Marxists take these questions seriously, unlike those who, such as Ryle, treat them as pseudo-problems.

David would no doubt agree that Marxists take the questions seriously and that they approach them differently from other thinkers. Indeed, he suggests that the Marxist approach is *so* different that Ilyenkov's attempt to counterpose Marx to Descartes, Fichte, Freud and so on, is ahistorical because these different thinkers are literally talking about different things. I don't agree with this. It is true that they gave different answers and that the problems were posed for them in different conceptual schemes. But these contrasting 'frames of reference' were just different means to attack the very same problems. I cannot accept the implication that different philosophical systems are, in a certain sense, incommensurable. The incommensurability of theories is implausible even in the natural sciences. It is important to argue with Kuhn's notorious thesis that the discourse of science goes on within paradigms which are in some sense 'closed' to one another. When it comes to philosophy, Kuhn's position is all the more counter-intuitive. For, while it is possible to study contemporary physics without taking an interest in Newton, let alone Aristotle, it is impossible to study philosophy in a cultured manner without coming to grips with Aristotle, Descartes, or Kant. In a way, they are our contemporaries. The problems discussed by these philosophers, and the solutions they gave, have not become antiquated. They continue to influence our thought. For me, in a certain sense, all philosophical problems are eternal problems. The problem of truth discussed by contemporary analytic philosophers, is just the same problem that Aristotle attempted to solve. This is perhaps the distinguishing feature of philosophy as a discipline. Thus a truly historical approach must be cognizant of how the same questions have been treated over time. It is talk of incommensurability that is ahistorical for it cannot speak to the question of how theories develop.

David suggests, in his discussion of Descartes and Fichte, that Ilyenkov conflates the notions of self-consciousness and self-cognition (*samopoznanie*) or self-knowledge. This isn't fair. For Descartes, and certainly for Fichte (and others too), self-consciousness was conceived as the premise and foundation of self-knowledge. (It was Kant, by

the way, who distinguished these things; for him, self-consciousness and self-cognition are quite different phenomena.) Thus, it is no coincidence that Descartes' ideas not only began endless philosophical discussions about self-consciousness, but were also the starting point of classical psychological theories of introspection that treat introspection as a means of self-cognition.

Let me summarize my position. Individuality is formed in the process of interaction with the ensemble of social relations, but so too is the deep structure of personhood itself, for my person is formed in my interaction with others. This interaction is at once both contingent and necessary. It is contingent in the sense that the encounters with others that make me what I am occur contingently. Here there is a considerable factor of chance at work. But it is necessary in that *outside* this system of interaction no person can exist.

Two qualifications are necessary. First, don't think this position underestimates human beings' natural characteristics. Of course, each individual is unique. The natural potentialities of each individual are different, and it is upon them that the ensemble of social relations is laid. Second, persons are not passive products of a system of relations. Nothing of the kind. Marx's point is that human beings are *active*. We make ourselves, but we can do so only in a system of relations with other people. This is a very important feature of the Marxist position which perhaps we do not stress enough.

Now for the problem of death. Of course, I agree that nothing can diminish the fact that, in death, individuality is lost. Death is always tragic. We can't take solace in the ensemble of social relations, but nor can we, in my view, in the strange idea of personhood as something eternal and absolute, a necessary relation to oneself which was, is, and always will be. It's interesting to note, however, that the construal of personhood as individuality in a way which emphasizes the uniqueness and dissimilarity of persons is very much a historical product. The majority of cultures, past and present, do not treat personhood in this way. It's a modern Western mode of thought, characteristic neither of antiquity, nor of the European cultures of the Middle Ages. Take the problem of authorship in the Middle Ages which Bakhtin so beautifully described. When someone painted an icon or created a sculpture, he

did not dream of showing *who* had done it. This was not considered important. And Eastern civilizations often reveal different attitudes to death and the self. For modern Western cultures, of course, individuality is a crucial value and our concepts of personhood reflect this.

I must admit, however, that the problem of death is not much discussed in Soviet philosophy . . .

**Davydov:** What about Frolov's recent piece in *Voprosy filosofii*?<sup>17</sup>

**Lektorsky:** Actually, Frolov approaches the question on the basis of the myth that David attacked. For him, the most important thing is that we somehow survive in our contribution to culture. Frolov has some interesting things to say, but he's hardly the last word on the subject.

Finally, a word about David's thought experiment. Well, it is interesting, but I am reluctant to agree with the conclusions David draws. I am inclined to side with Wittgenstein who disapproves of such procedures in philosophy. The experiment is indeed rather extravagant. The experiment presupposes that, as it were, the body is one thing, the brain another . . .

**Davydov:** What! Never distinguish the brain from the body in that way!

**Lektorsky:** . . .and memory is a third. You imagine the three separated and swopped about among various individuals. But, the whole thing is that, a person – the bearer of this 'I', this self – and his memory are connected with a given body and a given brain. So when you talk about their separation and recombination you destroy the very conditions in which it makes sense to discuss these questions. But if the point of the experiment is just to show that the problems you discuss are real and not pseudo-problems, then I will grant you that. Questions of the interrelation of self, brain and body, and of self and other, are indeed central philosophical questions.

David's paper is essentially a critique of Ilyenkov's '*Čto že takoe ličnost*'?', although it is also a criticism of Marxist positions on personhood in general. I want to emphasize in conclusion that, although Ilyenkov's article is interesting and provocative and represents our position very well, I do not believe these problems have been entirely solved. However cogent Ilyenkov's position, there is a great deal to add since



this whole area is enormously rich in both philosophical and psychological interest.

**Davydov:** I think that in Ilyenkov's article there are two distinct areas of investigation: on the one hand, a discussion of the human essence, and on the other a treatment of the problem of personhood. Although the book in which the article was published is called *S čego načinaetsa ličnost'*, a significant part of the piece is devoted to a cogent, though popular, exposition of the Marxist conception of the human essence. This part of the article wholly fulfils a very significant, and very topical, task. It attacks those naturalistic conceptions of human beings which continue to exist in our philosophy and psychology and, indeed, are growing in strength. In the last years of his life, Ilyenkov fought angrily with Soviet naturalists about questions of the relation between the social and the biological in human development, the genetic preconditioning of human abilities, and so on. It is well-known that while the success of genetics strengthens naturalism about human abilities in general, the success, or rather the *imaginary* success of psychophysiology contributes to the survival of naturalism in research into human mental processes. Hence the wealth of naturalistic literature found here. Ilyenkov joined forces with the prominent Soviet geneticist N. I. Dubinin to argue that all human abilities have a socio-communal genesis, and he took on David Dubrovsky in a well-known debate on the status of mental processes.<sup>18</sup> The article under discussion continues these themes; a large part of it is devoted to proving the Marxist thesis that the human essence is the ensemble of social relations, and that from this essence we can derive all aspects of personhood, including emergent individuality.

In my view, although Ilyenkov's article is cogently written (he was able to write clearly and imaginatively), his real contribution to the debate about persons – his way of developing the significance of the Marxist thesis – does not come through here. Well, it was a popular book, written to propagate the views of certain fairly well-known Marxist thinkers.<sup>19</sup> The intention was to block off the stream of all these naturalistic ideas from the consciousness of the general public. But let me not dwell on that. My point is that there is another side of

Ilyenkov's contribution which emerges far less clearly in the article. This concerns not the human essence as such, but personhood in particular.

For Ilyenkov, someone is a person (*ličnost'*) if he or she is able to break accepted norms of social practice. To *break* them! And from that perspective, we know that the overwhelming majority of people do not possess personhood, for they are brought up with the souls of conformists and submit themselves to the norms of existence created by others. From this point of view, they are not persons. Indeed, there's very little personhood about. Ilyenkov's image of a person is thus one of a courageous individual, responsible for his or her own actions. He argues further that social life is such that circumstances can arise in which someone who possesses the source (*načalo*) of personhood may lose it and become a *mummy*. They live physically, but they have lost their personhood. In this sense, someone may die as a person before he dies as a social being. In my view, this distinction between the individual and the person represents the strongest aspect of Ilyenkov's article . . .

**Bibler:** But it is not there!

**Davydov:** It is too . . .

**Bibler:** If it is, then so much the worse for the article.

**Davydov:** Excuse me, but it is there. For God's sake, it is there in black and white. You just have to read it properly. But I'll tell you for nothing that you don't read everything properly. (*Laughter*)

Why is this important? Today we face the social problem of conformism. This, for Ilyenkov, is the same question as the nature of personhood. How are we to bring up real persons? In the article by Frolov I mentioned above, there's a big quotation from the 26th volume of Marx and Engels' *Collected Works*, where Marx enthusiastically evaluates Ricardo's position on social development. Here Marx says something very close to the position I find in Ilyenkov. Marx writes that sometimes the interests of certain individuals coincide with the interests of the development of society. For those whose personal interests, for various reasons, coincide with the interests of a society where real social struggle is taking place, their personal interests coincide with the progressive tendencies of social development as we conventionally express it. On this basis, personhood is born, in all spheres.

When I reproduced this Ilyenkavian thesis at a recent conference on the psychology of personhood, there was a scandal! Everyone started to say, "So, not everyone is a person?!" "That's right," I replied, "not everyone." "And what about us?!", they bleated. Well, you want to say, "People who ask such stupid questions aren't even in the running!" (*Laughter*)

It is really rather difficult to say who does and who does not possess personhood. Fortunately or unfortunately, psychology has not discovered the litmus of personhood. In my view, personhood is not 'chosen', or rather, it is chosen only in the sense in which Marx spoke of special individuals who find themselves situated in a privileged position in terms of the responsibility vested upon them by the social order. Such people are few, but they are present at all levels, from housewives to politicians. However, we see many politicians who are not persons and many housewives who we happily consider are. For example, I consider my own mother to have been a person. She died a long time ago, but she died a person. It's also true that her personhood grew on profoundly religious ground. But, accepting certain Christian precepts, she was a courageous woman because she broke a succession of accepted customs, norms, and demands. Moreover, in this she risked a lot. She was a non-conformist. From my mother's point of view, any self-respecting Christian must have the courage to stand up for his or her position against all others. This she identified with the image of Christ. She was, however, by no means a theologian. She never read theological works.

So personhood may have many sources, including religious ones. Wherever there are the roots of non-conformism, we see the beginning of personhood. The idea of fully developed personhood is another matter; the problem of the far-off day when personhood will be fully developed remains unsolved. Ilyenkov, however, built the foundation for a distinction between the human individual, social by his or her very nature, and personhood.

Ilyenkov's views on personhood have great significance for contemporary psychology, especially educational psychology. It transpires that the schoolpupil is not a person. Hegel, in his day, wrote very perceptively on this problem, although in rather different terms. For Hegel, young people, spending their time in educational institutions, do not

engage in *practice*. They master *ideals*. When they leave these institutions and confront the real practice of civil life, they must either act in accord with their ideals or betray them. By 'practice' here I mean the real productive activity of social reality, in which we confront tasks that demand we take individual responsibility.

**Another:** But surely a pupil in 5th grade can . . .

**Davydov:** Nothing of the sort! They do not have free choice. And here one must freely choose how to act. In the literature on the psychology of custom, we observe that the majority act in conformity with the demands of authority, and thereby they enter a path bereft of personhood. On this score, one should read Tolstoy's magnificent 'Death of Ivan Ilych'.<sup>20</sup> Ivan Ilych, after leaving an institution of higher education, strove to lead a pleasant and respectable life. And what he found pleasant and respectable was what was commanded by authority. Thus Ivan Ilych entered the path bereft of personhood. And with us today similar things occur. Indeed, the majority go that way. That's why the question of how to bring forth personhood is so important to us. Hegel, moreover, thought that a person only acquires personhood if he takes upon himself the responsibility for serious social, moral and political decisions. He must solve such problems himself, and not 'let another man enter his soul'. We find an analogous position in Chernyshevsky, which Lenin quotes approvingly. Thus school only forms the premise or ground of personhood, which finds its synthesis only when the individual confronts social reality, civil society. If you're looking for a 'strong thesis' to read into Ilyenkov then look no further.

Now to the question of self-consciousness. Ilyenkov did not really study the phenomenon of self-consciousness. Well, thank God for that. In Russian literature you can find anything you like on self-consciousness, amongst all the waffling and religious searchings, and spread much thicker than in Dostoevsky or Tolstoy. Ilyenkov was simply advancing the old Marxist idea that, just as an epoch should not be judged by the way it represents itself, so a person should not be judged by his or her words. Ilyenkov prettifies this thought (which is also in Hegel and Lenin): someone is a person to the extent to which she is a socially significant individual who establishes herself by her deeds in the complex system of social interrelations, and not to the extent that she wallows

in herself and so on. Ilyenkov once wrote that a person is an individual who is able to bear the tension of all social contradictions. The tension of these contradictions is often reflected in personal suffering, in doubts and searchings, for one often gets slapped in the face in the process. But personhood is not to be found in endless self-reflection. That's only to dig one's own grave.

Issues of self-consciousness and self-knowledge are not much discussed in our philosophical literature, but they do feature in our artistic literature to a considerable extent. It seems to me that (despite my joking remarks just now) both classical and contemporary Russian literature provide enormous insight into questions of personhood and self-consciousness. On this topic, we should stay away from both philosophers and psychologists, for neither have much of interest to say. Equally, science is a poor way to study people. When people talk about 'scientific philosophy' I reach for my gun. Of course, we must understand the term 'science' historically. When I attack science I attack the methodology of the Enlightenment, of science naturalistic and objectivist and focused entirely on causal relations. To understand persons we must go beyond the boundaries of science to literature, works of art, ethics, and religion. A scientific approach, be it Marxist or some other, cannot grasp the *whole* human being. I suppose it may capture the human essence, but from essence to reality is a distance of enormous proportions. Ilyenkov knew this, because he was not only a philosopher, but also an artist, and to a certain extent, he was a moralist in the best sense of the term.

Now for your 'experiment', David. My dear friends, whoever got it into their heads that the brain can be distinguished from the other parts of the body in the integral life-activity of the individual? The *whole* body is the carrier of a grandiose ideomotoric code. So you can't talk of brain transplants for a brain simply could not work in another body . . .

**Bibler:** But look, that's just irrelevant . . .

**Davydov:** Not so, for what I am challenging is whether the experiment *can* be represented in thought. David himself will admit there's a problem about whether imaginability is the test of possibility. The issues that David seeks to raise with this thought experiment – say, about the

relation of consciousness, self-consciousness, and personhood – have to be raised another way.

**Mikhailov!** Come here, you're in charge of all this . . .

**Mikhailov:** Let me invite Vladimir Solomonovich to take the floor again.

**Bibler:** As I said earlier, the serious challenge posed by David's paper lies in his claim that, when we assert that the human essence is 'the ensemble of social relations', what we say is ambiguous between strong and weak interpretations. Let's have the thesis in Ilyenkov's own inimitable style:

Personhood is to be understood as something substantive and corporeal [notice that Ilyenkov has 'personhood' here and not 'a human being' or 'the human essence'], as the real corporeal-substantial totality of substantial-corporeal relations which link a given individual to other individuals . . . Personhood, in general, is the particular expression of the life-activity of the ensemble of social relations in general.<sup>21</sup>

Now, David argues, if we take this to mean that personhood in some sense *just is* the ensemble of social relations, then we have a proposition that is essentially impossible to defend. But if we say that personhood takes shape in the process of social relations, then this is obviously true but rather trivial. Moreover, it invites the objection that the ensemble of social relations, conceived as a kind of universal totality of relations binding together a given society, is identical for all its members, and this fact cannot explain the emergence of individual differences in people.

**Davydov:** But it is not identical at all!

**Another:** And Ilyenkov argues against just such a conception, by the way.

**Mikhailov:** There's no need to interrupt.

**Bibler:** So, the first thesis is impossible to defend and the second isn't worth it because it's banal.

**Davydov:** I don't understand. What is impossible to defend? That the essence of personhood is the ensemble of social relations? Only Ilyenkov stressed that we are talking about *internalized* social relations.

**Bibler:** He did nothing of the kind!

**Davydov:** But tell me Volodya, why is it impossible to defend this position?

**Bibler:** Well, once again, the strong thesis is impossible to defend because we seem committed to two mutually exclusive claims: first, that personhood is the ensemble of social relations, and second, that society is the ensemble of social relations. Consequently, when I attempt to make the strong thesis intelligible, I find I can't take logical responsibility for it. And if we assert simply that, in the process of social life, persons are formed (as you like to say, Vasa, upon leaving university, or even at the very end of life itself), then that can, of course, be defended, but there arises an important question. In what way is the part formed that is *not* reducible to those social relations? What is the origin of that part which the ensemble of social relations influences and which is therefore irreducible to those relations?

In order to show that the strong thesis is impossible to defend, David produced his thought experiment. Clearly, he does not advance it as a real possibility. He simply wants to press the point that those philosophers who have asserted that individuality is seated in the structure of the brain can answer for their words. If it turns out that Felix's brain is transplanted into my body, then supporters of this position will say that, in the given case, Bibler's body acquires the personhood of Mikhailov. They know what to say. We are not talking about whether they've guessed right or not. Others, who believe personhood is identical with memory and character will say that, in the case where my body has Mikhailov's brain but *my* memory and character, that Bibler has a new brain. But what can those who hold that personhood is the ensemble of social relations say? In the face of such an experiment they simply have no answer. Well, we can laugh this off so long as we see the matter purely theoretically, but if we imagine that there is something at stake here – if it transpires that we must decide who is who on pain of death – then it is clear we have a problem that demands an answer, and furthermore, a problem that focuses on the nature of self-consciousness. That is the sense of David's thought experiment, so it's a waste of time to tell him that the brain cannot be removed from the body, and so on. He will no doubt agree, but that's not the point.

So, the first point I want to develop is this. I think the Marxist tradition, and, before it, the tradition of High Rationalism, which includes not only Hegel, but also Leibniz and Descartes, would say that the strong

thesis (that the human essence *is* the ensemble of social relations) cannot be separated from the weak thesis (that the ensemble of social relations represents, at best, the essence of the process in which personhood is formed). They turn out to be, in some paradoxical way, *two sides of the same thesis*. And a representative of this tradition should turn to David and say (we can argue about whether what they say is correct, but we ought first to understand it): So, a person is 'the ensemble of social relations', as Marx says. But now one must ask what is meant by the terms 'is', 'totality' and 'relation'. On no account should one take these concepts for granted. In this case, if I say that personhood 'is' the ensemble of social relations, then I am by no means asserting a formal equality. 'Is', in the logic of Hegel, is inseparable from *becoming*. Existence, Being, acts in unity with non-Being. Thus, when I, as an educated Marxist, assert that personhood is the ensemble of social relations, I am speaking within a philosophical position with a definite logic of its own. The concept of identity here is not abstract identity. Personhood *is* and *is not* the ensemble of social relations. Therefore, the weak thesis, through the window if not through the door, enters the strong thesis. We must consider what 'is' means here. A person cannot simply be; all the time he is *becoming*. And all the time, the ensemble of social relations in which he acts is focused in him. It transpires that these relations must be transformed, and so they are with every act. Is this kind of individuality banal? No. Everyone is confronted by the problems of his or her own life. They are focused in each person and transformed by his or her individuality. And in this, *being* and *becoming* are inseparable.

Furthermore, you must think about what is meant by the idea of 'totality' (*sovokupnost'*). This is not simply a 'collection', but a kind of *integration* of social relations in which there emerges 'n + the unit'. The unification, or 'copulation' (if you will forgive the intended ambiguity) of these relations leads to the birth of that which did not previously exist in the given totality. So, it is not serious to criticize some assertion while ignoring its real historico-logical meaning. I aim this remark not so much at you, David, but at analytic philosophers in general. Moreover, our philosophers are no better. For ten years philosophers here have been discussing whether it is possible to represent the qualities of miniature particles as an ensemble of relations, but some understand



‘ensemble’ simply as a summation of qualities, a pot-pourri of attributes, while others work with a more integral conception. They thus spend a lot of time talking past one another. So my point is that we can take responsibility for Ilyenkov’s words only if we are prepared to answer for the whole philosophical context in which they make sense. An isolated phrase can neither be strong nor weak; it just lacks meaning altogether.

My second main point is this. It’s crucial that, for Marx, the thesis that the human essence – the essence of individuality – is the ensemble of social relations, does not simply reduce to the assertion that human beings are *nothing* more than the ensemble of social relations. That would simply mean the identification of the individual, or individuality, with society. Marx deciphers the paradoxical sense of his thesis many times. Let’s take the following passage from ‘On James Mill’:

Since human nature is the true communal nature of man, men create and produce their communal nature by their natural action; they produce their social being which is no abstract, universal power over against single individuals, but the nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own enjoyment, his own wealth.<sup>22</sup>

So you see, it is not only that the human essence lies in our connection with each other, but that the essence of social connectedness is individuality. Social relations are focused in individuals, and do not exist outside them, as some kind of abstract, universal force. This is fundamental.

When we say that certain external relations in which an individual acts are an essence, we must take into account that here a process of *internalization*, of transformation, takes place. But just using the word ‘internalization’ doesn’t make everything right, for it is too easy to hold that internalization means that social relations are simply transplanted into the individual and act there in a kind of diminished form. But in this process, social relations are transformed in some fundamental way, becoming a form of psychological, not sociological, determination . . .

**Davydov:** Even *breaking* the sociological determinants.

**Bibler:** *Transforming* them fundamentally from within. I prefer to put it this way because ‘breaking’ is a somewhat mechanical notion. I have said this many times before, but I am simply amazed when I read in the psychological literature that “such-and-such an external process or activity is internalized,” full stop. But can that really be all there is to it? Are social relations somehow simply transplanted into the soul?

As Vygotsky never tired of repeating, internalization is a process of *transformation*: the logic of reference is transformed into the logic of meaning, the syntax and semantics of external speech are fundamentally transformed so that inner speech has quite a different syntax and semantics, where things temporally distinct act simultaneously, where a distinct system of relations is condensed to a point, a subjective phenomenon, and where there emerges 'n + the unit', irreducible, as always, to that focal point. The psychologists have heard all that, they've read Vygotsky, and yet they throw away the texts and begin to babble: "So, Vygotsky showed that in the beginning there are social relations which are then transplanted into the soul by internalization, and . . . ." Where is this in Vygotsky? Where is it in Marx? Nothing of the kind is to be found, but we are used to reading what we want to see. That's a psychological law too. We project views upon a text and then, depending on our preference, either attack the author or pat him or her on the back.

The idea of Being as transformation (the 'is' of transformation), as a focusing in the individual from which the irreducible emerges, is a crucial notion. For Marx, the notion of activity possesses from the very beginning a strange character, this is the idea of the individual *not coinciding with the activity itself*. If this were not so, activity would be senseless. Marx says that activity is always a *self-striving*. Activity, even the most basic form of labour, is connected with *change* by definition. For example, an agent must isolate the object (*predmet*) of activity as the object of his activity, and not simply, as for the animal, as that which must coincide with him. The object which I work upon cannot enter into me and be assimilated by me. The very reproduction of the object in consciousness and in action, necessary in the most simple process, represents the object as not assimilable to me. In this lies the separation of myself as a *subject*, as that which does not coincide with my thingishness, which is not identical to myself as thing. Activity thus presupposes that I do not coincide with my activity, I change it. Therefore, I am not identical with the way in which that activity defines me.

Consider tools, for tools mediate activity, and are developed and changed over time. Tools are a continuation of my own organs which are nevertheless distinguishable from me. Thus, in my use of tools,

I, as it were, work *upon myself*, or 'strive after myself'. And Marx, in distinction from Hegel, writes that self-consciousness is not the definition of the human essence, for activity itself has a *self-striving* character and therefore, in this character, we find a prior definition of self-consciousness. Thus, it is not that we have activity, labour, social relations, and then, as the result of these relations, persons are formed as the effect of economic relations existing outside them (as the textbooks of '*istmat*' write to this day). That is not what this is all about. In the course of activity, personhood and individuality are formed (let's ignore whether they are identical; for present purposes we may suppose they are), but the principal question is to what degree the agent, participating in social relations and social activity, is formed as something irreducible to that activity.

This is not just the issue of the formation of a psychological subject as something irreducible to sociological determinants, but also the question of the degree to which the agent is identical with his or her role in the ensemble, and with his or her actions. For instance, Ilyenkov takes Lenin's words about judging people by their deeds and throws them into a new context. And this invites the response that, equally, if we are going to judge someone only by his deeds then we can *only* judge him partially, *only* externally, for a person as a psychological being cannot be reduced to his deeds for one simple reason. Suppose I am a machine-operator. My business is with metal rather than, say, with land. Here, not only is the character of my work impressed upon me, but also *the fact that this is metal*, and I can't work with metal in the way that I can with earth. The nature (*zakonomernost'*) of this metal, this material, this substance, leaves its mark on my action. Therefore to judge me purely by my actions is unserious, for my activity does not depend wholly upon me, but upon the part of the ensemble of social relations in which I find myself, on those bonds in which I take part. I may break them, change them, or simply passively enter into them. The actions will be mine, but will be determined not only by my individual singularity, but by those relations in which my singularity is transformed.

Forgive me, Vasa (Davydov), for taking myself to be a grown-up, but from childhood, from the kindergarten, there arises the necessity to participate, to be included, and at the same time the necessity to

revolt. The feeling of revolt – “I want things to be different” – of ‘non-coincidence with things’, arises from the very beginning. This does not simply come down to the fact that one child, due to the disposition of his genes, is prone to revolt, while another is a conformist. It depends, of course, on the child’s upbringing and the degree to which the relations we impose on him are allowed to become simply a set of external norms and standards. They should rather take the form of real problems, of ‘life-disparities’. That is, when I enter into relations, into *what* do I enter? Not surely into some kind of standardized sphere of activity, but into a mass of questions that are posed for me, into difficulties I must resolve. I see a little chair. I want to sit on it. But then I shall be too small. I want to be the same height as the others. I start to put something on the chair. . . . That is, it is necessary to *change* relations, because those relations, do not coincide with each other: lives are different, contradictory, problematic, and not standardized by their very essence. So when we speak of the role of the ensemble of social relations, we mean that the human spirit (*duša*) is formed in the necessity to solve these emerging problems from the very first moment of existence, problems which the person can solve only if he or she does not coincide with the relations which bring these problems to life.

For this reason, personhood cannot coincide with the norms set by external relations. On this score, Ilyenkov’s article contains a most unfortunate passage. He writes: “Personhood arises when the individual begins to act independently as a subject . . . (very good, but he continues) . . . to realize external actions by norms and standards given from without.”<sup>23</sup> Disaster! Well, I know, Vasa, that this isn’t the real Ilyenkov, but I draw attention to it because we must improve our way of putting these points. There are many such problematic assertions. I pointed out before that social relations are reduced to substantial-corporeal relations, where for Marx even economic value is super-corporeal, super-sensuous. There is much such stuff. I don’t think, David, you should dwell on Ilyenkov’s articles on this theme, or indeed, forgive me Felix, on Mikhailov’s or Bibler’s, but you should try to get to grips with the essence of the concepts, to get ‘to the heart of the matter’, as Ilyenkov loved to say. Each of us here has his peculiar approach, each with its

manifest flaws and failings, its unhappy moments. To judge a tradition's ideas on the basis of a few articles is not appropriate.

David spoke about self-consciousness. To be sure, the problem of self-consciousness has received little serious attention from Soviet philosophers. Typically self-consciousness is treated in either of two ways. On the one hand, it is reduced to the philosophical concept of 'reflexion' (and here, though there is a genuine psychological problematic, the philosophical discussions rarely capture what psychologists are after). On the other hand, self-consciousness is reduced in a way that sometimes occurs in the articles of Ilyenkov. He rightly argues that we must get away from the crude naturalism on which the nature and essence of human life can only be explained in terms of the relation between physical bodies. Further, he argues that we must understand self-consciousness as the relation of a person to him- or herself. This would hardly appear worth arguing, for it seems so obviously true, but some have wished to argue against, say, the possibility of solipsism, by holding that the subject cannot relate to him- or herself but only to another. Now, the idea of a pure relation of the subject to him- or herself is deemed problematic, so Ilyenkov picks up this famous remark of Marx's:

In a certain sense, man is in the same situation as a commodity. As he neither enters into the world in possession of a mirror, nor as a Fichtean philosopher who can say 'I am I', a man first sees and recognises himself in another man. Peter only relates to himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, in whom he recognises his likeness. With this, however, Paul also becomes from head to toe, in his physical form as Paul, the form of appearance of the species man for Peter.<sup>24</sup>

This is an interesting and instructive remark, but it is often developed quite wrongly. Does the sum of relations between these bodies comprise an answer to the question of the nature of self-consciousness? This is just no good. What Marx points to is significant, but we must not sink to the depths where we say things like, "Your opinion about me constitutes *my* self-consciousness."

**Another:** But there's no need to overdo this. Ilyenkov clearly says that self-consciousness is formed when the subject can relate to herself *as to another*, that is, she relates to herself by occupying the point of view of others.

**Bibler:** But genuine self-consciousness is absent there too. There are just three dots in its place, for the contrary assertion is missing, and this is most important as far as the psychological definition of personhood is concerned. Personhood is formed when the subject comes to relate to him- or herself as to another. Very good. But personhood, self-consciousness, the self, is formed just where you left those three dots . . . where the subject comes to relate to *another as to him- or herself*. Without that inversion, no moral or logical consciousness is possible. Unless we turn this thesis around, and turn oneself around to confront oneself as another and oneself as oneself-in-another, all truly human sensibilities cannot be.

In the light of phenomena such as self-consciousness, which define personhood and bring out the significance of the idea of 'non-coincidence with oneself', it seems wrongheaded to construe personhood as the ability to alter, or to break with, surrounding reality. Well, there were those who tried to smash the Weimar Republic, but this was no great mark of personhood. The mere striving to destroy does not display personhood. So here I disagree with Vasa.

In my view, the problem of self-consciousness represents a crucial starting point for understanding personhood. Personhood begins in the moment of dissatisfaction with oneself. This is not simply a psychological point. It is clear that the child manipulating his tiny chair, of which I spoke of earlier, does not coincide with himself. He does not coincide with his activity: he is not equal to that which he seeks. At the very foundation of the formation of personhood lies that non-coincidence with self, and with it, the necessity that all my actions should be understood as *one deed*, so that the whole of my fate should be understood, and should have actually become, not simply the result of forces acting upon me, but my unitary deed, played out from birth to death. Here considerations of self-consciousness are important, and indeed, self-consciousness conceived as self-knowledge.

The idea of a life as a unity emerges in different ways in different historical epochs. In antiquity, the point or focus of the whole of a man's life, understood as a single manifestation of his fate, is expressed in the idea of *acme*: the point of culmination or blossoming. In the course of forty years of heroic deeds, a man's life comes to a focus and is seen

as the manifestation of him as one. The Middle Ages introduced a very important idea that is seemingly readily rejected today. This is the idea of death as a kind of summation of life. Here, the moment before death is conceived as the collection of a person into *one*, so that the whole of his life can be understood as one deed for which he is responsible.

Modernity brings with it a very complicated conception of the focus of an individual life, where the external – that in a person's activity which is connected with his non-coincidence with him- or herself – can be understood as the manifestation of the subject as an integral, and most importantly, an atemporal, being.

But this is not the place to embark on a discussion of these ideas. Here's a different, but equally important, point. Ilyenkov says that language is of secondary significance for philosophical investigation. There are all sorts of other manifestations of mind in human activity. This point should be taken seriously, but at the same time, we should observe the following. In contrast to passive sensory modalities such as sight, where objects act upon the perceiver, speech and hearing are extremely important in the material expression of self-consciousness. In speech I begin to hear myself. Aspects of speech are always connected with the dialectics of outer and inner speech, with the 'immersion' of outer speech in inner speech, and the non-coincidence of the latter with the former. This is immensely important: it reflects what Heidegger expressed when he said that in speech man hears his own Being and is non-coincident with it. My speech is not simply important because *you* hear it, but because I hear it myself.

**Lektorsky:** Moreover, I hear myself quite differently from how others hear me.

**Bibler:** Exactly so.

**Mikhailov:** In the purely physical sense or in terms of meaning?

**All (save Mikhailov):** In terms of meaning too.

**Davydov:** You hear yourself on tape saying things you simply did not realize were there when you were speaking.

**Bibler:** The most important thing is this. You hear *only* my outer speech, but I hear it against a background of intension that illuminates what I am saying. At the level of meaning, in the structure of meaning, my non-coincidence with myself in speech is displayed quite differently

than it is in what others hear from me. On the one hand, I 'say' many things which, thank goodness, you cannot hear, and on the other, the follies of what I am saying are understood far better by others than by myself. These factors are essentially connected with the idea of self-consciousness. If we take into account, in light of what was said by Vygotsky and others, that outer speech immersed in inner speech takes on a new syntax and semantics, then this 'introversion' of speech into thought has great significance for the understanding of the nature of thought itself.

**Davydov:** But Ilyenkov didn't belittle the role of speech as such. He just stressed that behind the word lies a reified meaning-reference.

**Bibler:** Okay, so the idea is that we must look to human activity and practice to understand meaning and thought. But in thought, human practice is somehow 'rolled into a ball' and is transformed. Action pertains to the done. Machines can act. But words, in a certain sense, relate to that which cannot be done. In this, the word, the unity of thought and speech, is the essential feature of self-consciousness.

In conclusion, let me say that I think the subject David has raised is most important and I have tried to speak to it by raising a few provocative ideas from the tradition of High Rationalism. Well, everyone dances to his own tune, which is called by his tradition. I have my existence as part of this tradition, and without it I could not think. It is fashionable today either to extricate oneself from this tradition and attempt to reveal its deep Freudian basis or to treat it as a big stick with which to beat down schools which think differently, turning Marx into a prophet who said infallible things that fall to us to interpret. I am not, of course, one to follow fashion.

While I adopt a serious attitude to my own philosophical universe of discourse, I should like to say the following to analytical philosophers. Although they often subtly lay out the logical essence of an argument, the trouble with analytic philosophers is that they reduce theoretical concepts to sets of atomic sentences. And if they decide to work outside their tradition, in a scheme where primary concepts such as 'is', 'totality' and 'relation' have a different logical significance from their role within the analytic tradition, they immediately go over to some kind of phenomenological definition of the subject under study (here,



personhood, individuality) and treat the conceptual scheme as some kind of formally given, immovable, data. But these concepts are also in the process of transformation. One must analyze how these seemingly immutable concepts are formed and transformed. Analytic philosophers do not pay attention to this. For example, we must take the very concept of the relation of essence and phenomenon by the hand and lead it out into the sunlight of historico-logical and culturo-logical meaning, and only then with it be possible to speak about strong or weak interpretations of Marx's, and Ilyenkov's, thesis.

**Mikhailov:** As I mentioned earlier, it seems to me that David's paper gives refined expression to an objection to the 'Marxist thesis' we commonly hear, not so much from philosophers, but psychologists (though they don't invoke David's distinction between strong and weak interpretations): "Very well," they say, "we are agreed that a human being lives in society, in a 'social environment', that he or she enters into various relations with other people and that his or her character and moral sense are formed in the context of all this . . ."

**Davydov:** Banality!

**Mikhailov:** "But (so they go on) you are aspiring to something more. You claim to be revealing the *essence* of all those processes with which we are concerned as psychologists studying specific aspects of human existence; that is, language acquisition, cognitive processes, the nature of learning, and so on. But vague talk about social relations scarcely gets us to the essence of these phenomena."

This objection reflects one side of a clash of two approaches, two logics, two ways of constructing the object of discussion. I think that Bibler expressed this conflict quite brilliantly in what he said about the copula 'is'. On the one hand, there is the naturalistic, or 'object' logic, on the basis of which the above objection is posed. This takes the object given as an objective, present, structured totality of various qualities and properties. In contrast, we can see the object of enquiry quite differently, as a self-negating, developing formation, directed against or onto itself, as a process which is a unity at its base but is at the same time multivarious in its manifestations.

If we work within the latter logic, it seems to me we should take the weak, empirical thesis about human needs and abilities in all their

diverse manifestations, and show how, through it, we can see that origin, or *arche*, by which we can define the very essence of all these disparate phenomena. That is, speaking lyrically, we must aim to make the weak variant one with the strong. We should object to David's position like this: You think that the strong thesis cannot be defended, but we'll do just that precisely by considering it through the weak thesis, through the idea of *becoming* or *movement*. Bibler has expressed the logical side of the matter very well. I don't want to repeat it, I simply want to try to show it empirically.

I believe that, if we try to describe empirically the human essence and its various manifestations within the terms of the first, naturalistic, logic, and then to reduce the manifestations to the essence or to derive the essence from its appearances and so on, we shall always be prone to fall into one of two extreme positions. As I tried to show in my last article, these two extremes are represented in psychology by, on the one hand, Rubinshtein's school, and on the other, Leontiev's.<sup>25</sup> Rubinshtein treats the human essence as *given* prior to communion with other people (*obščeniija*) and the influence of the ensemble of social relations. The essence is a distinct and prior thing. Thus Rubinshtein (and I have followed this closely in his works) attributes to each human being a individual source or *arche*. That is, a human being enters the world with a particular property. Rubinshtein calls it mind (psyche), others have called it 'the power to act', and some may choose to call it something else, but, in any case, the essence is defined as something *given* by nature.

**Lektorsky:** Does Rubinshtein really hold such a view?

**Mikhailov:** Yes. For Rubinshtein, 'the inner' is given as a manifestation of life (*žizenost'*) in general. Mind is always there in us somehow and somewhere; we are born with it and it develops from conception to death. *How* it develops depends on the ensemble of social relations, on activity, and so on. Here, Rubinshtein's famous 'dual determination' manifests itself: the influence of the external through the internal. It is all very wholesome and pretty but nevertheless the 'inner' is given and, with that, lies somehow beyond the bounds of investigation.

**Davydov:** Brushlinsky writes straight out that, according to Rubinshtein, the psyche is formed in activity but is not created.

**Mikhailov:** It is a kind of moulding. Form as moulding, so to speak. And the essence itself lies somewhere beyond the modelling process. The plasticine is, as it were, already given to us and which figures will be made out of it depends on the ensemble of social relations, or whatever else you care to name. But then it becomes legitimate to ask: what represents the essence of *this* special quality with which we enter the world? It will be quite impossible to reduce *that* to the ensemble of social relations, to object-orientated activity, or to any other concept in the Marxist repertoire. So we have to concede that Marx really occupied himself with *subsequent* questions about the development of the human person and not the essence of personhood itself . . .

**Davydov:** Banality, of course.

**Mikhailov:** And then we really have David's weak thesis thrust upon us as the tired repetition of trivial truths.

How did Leontiev approach this question? I want to stress that I'm not aiming to *criticize* these views, but to bring out the characteristic lines of thought that divide the two positions. Leontiev makes a very strong attempt to put the question differently. How successful it is another matter. For Leontiev, there is no special 'quality' which we can describe as the genuine, specifically human essence until a human being is included in the ensemble of social relations . . .

**Bibler:** Nor after . . . (*Laughter*)

**Mikhailov:** Quite so, but that's not really the point. All I'm doing here is trying to outline the characteristic shape of these two positions . . .

**Davydov:** The point is not that the mind is *formed*. Any evolutionist will agree with that. Even Piaget will agree.

**Mikhailov:** Of course. The whole problem is that if we are to answer for that logical tradition which Bibler calls 'High Rationalism', and which I prefer to call the tradition of genuine philosophy (philosophy in the true sense of the term, for today 'philosophical thinking' includes any project of generalization, everyday thinking, naturalism, and the logic of the natural sciences), then we must see these approaches as two sides of the same coin and seek to put the question another way. Really, how are we to define the human essence? And now I shall come out with my favourite and, in the context of the present discussion, rather surprising view. The human essence should be defined as the source

of *arche* of personhood (*ličnost' noe načalo*). Human beings are *born* persons – that's my favourite view.

**Bibler:** Personhood exists even prior to kindergarten?

**Mikhailov:** Yes, before kindergarten. Human beings are born persons. That is the human essence. Here, however strange it may seem, I am not really contesting what Vasa said ...

**Bibler:** That shows remarkable cunning.

**Mikhailov:** Well, in general I am rather cunning, but in the given case my cunning is simple. I understand very well the impetus behind the position Davydov expresses and which motivates the views of, not only Ilyenkov, but also Hegel. Nonetheless, this is not merely a terminological dispute between me and Ilyenkov; I want to urge a change in the very foundation of our position. In my view (and, though others may agree with me, I want to underline that this is *my* view so that I am not thought to be expounding Hegel or Marx or Ilyenkov), human beings live in a very beguiling way. They can exist *physically* only by transcending themselves, only by distinguishing themselves from themselves, and, through that internal, reflexive relation of non-coincidence with themselves (as Bibler loves to put it), *change themselves* (and not simply the 'objects' of their activity). Only then can they survive physically as individuals.

It is not that a human being is born a particular entity, acquires individuality and then grows up to be a person. One can talk like this *only* if one conceives of personhood in a very narrow sense: as a quality of a particular member of the ensemble of social relations, responsible for him- or herself and capable of non-conformism. But that conception, and that reality, is only one historical development of the genuine human essence, only one way in which it has found historical expression. It is one of the congealed (*stavšykh*) forms placed before us, and we should never attempt to define an essence on the basis of what is immediately given to us.

Here we must consider the phylogenetic and ontogenetic unfolding of the *arche* or source of personhood as such. Human beings came down from the trees and developed their own essence only because that essence, from the very beginning, had been *given* to them. *How* it was so is quite another matter. That essence was that they had to distinguish

themselves from themselves. They were forced not to coincide with themselves.

**Bibler:** It was not that they were ‘forced’ not to coincide with themselves, but that from the very beginning they *did not* coincide with themselves.

**Mikhailov:** Quite right and . . .

**Davydov:** Look, excuse me, human beings did not coincide with themselves from the beginning of their history because they were placed as individuals *into the collective*, as individuals in a totality of other people.

**Mikhailov:** Quite right, and I will show just that. And with this the concept of the ensemble of social relations really does become the definition of the human essence. Here I am defending the *strong* thesis. I believe it is not only possible but also necessary to defend it. Therefore, in that phylogenetic, or for clarity’s sake let’s say *historical*, enfolding of the human essence, we see how a human being undergoes ‘individualization’, how he finds the form, the objective (*predmetnyj*) form, of the means to change himself by reflecting upon himself, by orientating himself on himself. We see how the various forms of the social division of labour arise and how, in that ‘alienation from his essential powers’, a human being comes to see himself from outside of himself and thereby comes to change himself on the strength of that vision. This is certainly a massive problem, which I can scarcely address, even schematically. I shall rather attempt to make clear just one simple thing: the origins of anthropogenesis.

**Davydov:** How brave can you get?

**Mikhailov:** But what else is to be done? If I can’t define that source, that *arche*, even logically, then later, when we come to talk about the formation of developed forms of consciousness and complex human abilities, we shall be in a position where the beard takes itself to be the person on which it is growing. Our very way of setting up the problem has to confront the mechanism by which human beings overcome their own thingishness (*predmetnost’*), their own objectuality. When we assert that a human being is *formed* as a human being, becomes a human being – really *becomes* and is not stamped out by some machine – when we say that he or she becomes a human being by overcoming his or her own

reity, or animal essence, we are immediately drawn into the sphere of community (*obščenie*). We confront the *form* of communion with others and its symbolic representation in means of communication that are at first external and become internal.

Here, I should say in parenthesis that I happily agree with the view that, in the final analysis, the symbolism of speech in all its internal 'discreteness' is the most immediate, the most reified-immediate form of the social essence of human beings, that is, of self-expression, self-consciousness. I like this idea and return to it in my writings over and over. I don't want to repeat what Bibler said, though I should like to take issue with him on one point. The edifice of language, in its historical development, is connected not so much with the vibrations of air from which the signal system is formed (not the 'second signal system', of course!), but with the fact that, from the very beginning, it is a means of entering into community. Marx is right when he talks about 'the language of real life'. It is a form of sociality (*obščestvennost'*), an expression of the reified essence of my own relation to myself. That very sociality is represented, not as a developed norm as such, but in what is really possible to call 'the language of real life': it is represented in the thingishness of the symbolic means that maintain our mode of communion with others. What we call 'ritual', and all the ritualistic symbolism passed on so painstakingly from one generation to the next in communities with an indigenous division of labour (some call this a 'natural' division, but in my view it is certainly genuinely human and therefore *social* in kind), is the root of this form of communion with others. This basic form then begins to divide and develop and becomes the most fundamental means through which a person is split into herself *as* herself and herself as another. Here, of course, it has become language proper. But its source, its essence, is the thingishness, the objectuality, of that communion with others, where another person, or the ritual mask that person wears, stands as a symbol which reconstructs the unitary wholeness of the form of communion with others . . .

**Bibler:** In so far as you have already digressed from your theme, may I ask whether, when we define personhood in terms of a human being's non-coincidence with him- or herself, it is really necessary, from a logical point of view, to talk about anthropogenesis at all, for

the schism of this essence is such that human beings are *every moment* in the process of becoming themselves. This is the whole point of talk about non-coincidence, and this is just in what the singularity of the human person consists. It is our special feature. There is no reason to take anthropogenesis back to some dim point in history, for it is just as real right now. We never *are* people, we always only have the possibility to *become* people.

**Davydov:** You know what? Your idea of ‘communion with others’, Felix, contains something which Ilyenkov attacked. The Marxist tradition primarily focuses upon ‘object-mediated, material communion with others’ – Marx often used this kind of phrase – and the most important thought is that material, object-mediated communion persists always. The forms of linguistic communication of course attain autonomy and go off according to their own laws, but at the basis of their autonomy lies material communion with others. When you, Mikhailov, for all your cleverness, propagandize this stuff about community, you *abstract* to a considerable degree from this initial basis: object-mediated, material communion with others. Evald perceived this trend in many thinkers and never hesitated to protest. This was most clearly expressed in his 1974 article on hermeneutics which I recommend you read.<sup>26</sup>

**Mikhailov:** I know that article very well.

**Davydov:** You know it, but you’ve never read it! (*Laughter*)

**Mikhailov:** Nevertheless, I shall continue with what I am saying . . .

**Davydov:** We wouldn’t expect you to do anything else!

**Mikhailov:** Assuming that the present misunderstanding has been settled, all that remains is for me to explain one important fact. Please excuse that digression. I was forced into it. But pay attention to the fact that when my colleagues spoke we maintained an air of decorum, but I see these problems . . .

**Bibler:** . . . more sharply than they do . . .

**Mikhailov:** . . . and so they interrupt out of jealousy! (*Laughter*)

**Another:** It’s obvious why you’re interrupted. In speaking about the birth of personhood, you speak as if the individual human being is isolated, alone.

**Mikhailov:** Although this objection is obviously unfair, there is a grain of truth in it, and thank goodness for that! I do speak of human

beings as individuals, and will continue to do so, for it is precisely the essence of human individuals that I wish to define. I refuse to reduce human beings to the community. A company of people is a very good thing when there's something to drink, but when we are talking about the human essence we'd better make sure that what we say pertains to the nature of persons as particular individuals.

Okay, on the question of communion and community. I completely agree with Ilyenkov's hostility to the exaggeration of the concept of communion with others. The notion of community, now sometimes invoked as a theoretical alternative to the concept of object-orientated activity, is so often seen as some kind of social phenomenon hanging above human beings, connecting and uniting them. It is impossible to express this clearly, for in principle there is simply no reity, no objectuality about community thus conceived. This is a very serious problem which amounts, in its logical essence, to a kind of Hegelian panlogical interpretation of the universal, a view that is Hegelian in the worst sense of the term. On such a position, the universal is portrayed as something instantiated in community, relating to each person as a power hovering above and determining him or her.

**Bibler:** That very 'abstract power' of which Hegel speaks.

**Mikhailov:** Yes. Now, when I say that true collectivity finds objective form in 'communion with others', I am of course reminded of Marx, who spoke of objectification, not just in objects, but in the objective form of community with others. It was not for nothing that he called communism the truth of the process of 'the production of forms of community', and not, excuse me, the production of pieces of iron. This is important because many advocates of the theory of object-orientated activity are wont to invoke Ilyenkov without understanding the essence of the matter at all. There is a tendency to say: the subject takes the pure object, dances about with it, and bang, the object takes on a special essence which is 'objectified' in the object . . .

**Another:** No, the object is a reified action . . .

**Mikhailov:** So much the worse!

**Bibler:** Any human object (*predmet*) represents a form of communion with others. Otherwise it has no meaning at all.

**Davydov:** Who are you criticizing?



**Mikhailov:** Vasa, let he who has ears hear the target of my criticism.

**Lektorsky:** The behaviourists?

**Mikhailov:** Of course the behaviourists are included. So, I have finished my digression. Allow me to explain my position . . .

**Davydov:** We mustn't interrupt any more, or else you won't finish your paper.

**Mikhailov:** Exactly. And you interrupt to tell me that! Marvellous! (*Laughter*)

So, I want to underline that when I speak about the symbolic means (without question objectified in character) by which human beings in so-called 'primitive' societies fixed and relayed the subjective reality of their lives as culture, as their selfhood and *subjectivity*, I mean that here lies the fundamental definition of the linguistic essence of the system of the collectivity, immersed into human beings' inner world. Otherwise, I agree with what Bibler said.

So, now for the question of ontogenesis. Leontiev's work arrives at the following thought. Human beings are born as individuals with certain needs (*nuždy*): for air, nutrition, and so on. That is, they have basic needs of a physical nature which, when they encounter the already encultured or humanized world, acquire the character of genuinely human desires (*potrebnosti*). In order to return to the strong Marxist thesis, I want to exchange this line of thought for another. The fact is that the human child, by her birth, by her bodily, morphophysiological organization represents the continuation of the life of her parents, of their corporeality, their objectuality, of their bodiliness (this is crucial to the nature of *human* inheritance, the continuation of the physical existence of what Hegel so appropriately called the symbol, or rather the 'mark', of individuality, the human body). That objective, reified mark of the child's individuality, that reified singularity (which is just as much an individual particular as that cup, or any other product of human culture and history, only it is expressed through the life-*arche* of a corporeal organism) comes into being, comes to life, and *cannot live*. Here we confront a substantial contradiction. The child cannot live because that corporeality does not carry within itself the most important thing: it does not have a form of life (*sposob žizni*).

**Davydov:** It has instincts.

**Mikhailov:** You can call them ‘instincts’, or ‘needs’, or whatever, but in the final analysis it makes little difference because the child does not have the ability to live. If that ability is to emerge in that tiny body it is absolutely necessary that there be *another person*. We have a strange relation to birth. When the child is in the mother’s womb we confidently say that the child is part of the life-activity of the mother’s organism. And we see the whole of the mother’s organism as an organ of the life-activity of that tiny child. But when the umbilical cord is severed, we, like good naturalists, immediately see the individual as isolated and solitary. We look at him and say, “Ah, he has come into the world and all around him are other people.” Exactly that: *other people* . . . the group, the company, the community, the environment, nature, the sun, the air, . . . , and he is alone, tiny and alone. And supposedly all this ‘external’ environment provides nourishment of various kinds, he internalizes it, and . . .

**Davydov:** Alright, don’t drag it out! We’ve understood.

**Mikhailov:** The whole thing is that the reality of his being is tied to the continuity of symbiosis, not in the physical sense of the term, or rather, *not only* in the physical sense of the term, but in the necessity for there to be an organ of the child’s life-activity which is another person. The adult, the grown-up, is the physical organ of his life-activity. And in this we see an expression of David’s strong thesis; we see the strong thesis immediately given before us. Why? Because the adults, the other people, are effective organs of child’s life-activity only when they take a particular path: when they live their own life, when they see the child as an organ of the life-activity of their *own* organisms, when the child’s arrival and the joys of motherhood and fatherhood change *them* as persons, human beings, individuals (in the given case, the distinctions are not important). The more they are themselves *outside* the child, representing through themselves the totality of the history and culture of the community into which the child has been born, the more effective they will be as the organ of the development of that tiny body, of even its physical needs, its breathing and feeding.

Thus it transpires that it is neither the teat nor the spoon, as objects, that the child must come to ‘possess’ as objects of ‘object-orientated activity’, but rather the *subjectivity* of another person that is so crucial.

I must stress this. And that subjectivity is one side of what we call the identity of subjectivity and reified objectivity in the process of human life-activity. That very subjectivity of the adult, in relation to the child, becomes the child's own organ which brings him or her to life. But nevertheless the contradiction is still present. And to transcend it the child has but one way. To deny it. To bring forth his or her own selfhood, as yet unformed. There is nothing terrible in this. The child cannot simply adopt the point of view of the adult. She cannot 'internalize' actions. She can't take up the mother's position. Bibler mentioned this but I want to make it a little more concrete. The child is simply unable just to pick up the character of 'object-orientated' actions. She cannot simply internalize the mother's activity, as a determinate repertoire of actions. Can you imagine what it would be for a child to be able to wash her nappies before she can even see them? The whole thing is that her *becoming*, her distinguishing herself from herself, takes place first of all because her own organ of life-activity is represented for her as *counterposed to her*. Her own organ of life-activity, another person, acts not only as a mirror in which she looks at another and therefore becomes able to relate to herself. This is a very one-sided assertion, as Bibler was not slow to point out. He turned it upside down, as it were, and in so doing, put everything back in its place. One must relate equally to oneself as another and to another as oneself. At one and the same time; it is the same process.

So what do I conclude here? It is that very *not* taking up the position of a grown-up, that ingenious caprice, that refraction of those canons in which one is included through oneself, that is so important. We are creatures forced to solve one and the same contradiction from the moment of birth to the moment of death. The contradiction comes to this: here is a canon of life-norms, but I can only accept it by *changing* it, by transforming it through myself, making it mine not by simply accepting it, but by creating a relation to it and thereby transforming it, because I am included in that activity *in my own way*. And here it will do no good to appeal to the fact that I have different genes, or a different 'nature' ...

**Another:** Then what is it? Why does the child protest?

**Bibler:** Because he cannot breastfeed himself.

**Mikhailov:** I've said that already, really I have.

**Another:** And isn't it really because, up to his birth, others relate to him as to another?

**Mikhailov:** That's mysticism. If I say that the child can relate to himself because before birth people related to him as to another, then it seems I'm committed to some ridiculous view of the transmission of consciousness . . .

**Another:** What 'transmission of consciousness'? They relate to him as another, and when he is born he also relates to himself as another.

**Mikhailov:** That's mechanism. You must see the subtlety here. They don't relate to him as another. This is the great egoism of parenthood. They relate to him as themselves beyond or outside of themselves . . .

**Another:** And as another, at the same time.

**Lektorsky:** As their *own* other.

**Mikhailov:** Yes, as their own other. But let's stop this digression and return to the position of the child. For her, the most essential contradiction she is forced continually to solve, first by her physical actions and then also in thought, is her relation to the ensemble of social relations. And here we must speak out against the idea of the ensemble of social relations, or community, as that which somehow hovers above the individual, determining his or her actions, as an external force which forms and educates us all . . .

**Bibler:** Such a view reflects terribly on the present state of Soviet theory.

**Mikhailov:** Yes, it is a terrible and dangerous thing if the ensemble of social relations is portrayed as a system which simply *produces* us. This idea has already been put to the test and there is no need to return to it either in theory or, especially, in practice. Therefore, the strongest possible Marxist thesis begins from the same premise as that which opens the *German Ideology*: the premise of the *individual*.

**Davydov:** We begin from the individual and not the collective.

**Mikhailov:** Thus, only if we see collectivity as a contradiction posed and solved by the individual do we stand on a Marxist position. Then the strong thesis will completely coincide with the weak. And the weak will not be as banal as it appears when we approached things from a naturalistic position.

**Davydov:** The individual solves his own contradictions from the moment of his birth by means of tools presented by other people.

**Mikhailov:** For me, the most important consideration is the interpretation of the human essence as a *contradiction*: as a contradiction lying at the basis of the process of human life-activity. If this contradiction is formulated as an abstract *arche*, a source, and if we see in it *not* physical relations between people, but interpersonal relations, expressed through the subjective and its Being, through the ideal above all, through the sensuous and super-sensuous, through symbolism and so on, then this contradiction will be – in its unfolding, its evolution, and in the process of its solution – the coming into being of the Marxist thesis that, in its reality, the human essence is not an abstract thing present in each individual, but the ensemble of social relations.

**Bibler:** Just as the essence of these relations is the individual.

**Mikhailov:** Quite so.

**Davydov:** Besides the individual there is nothing at all.

**Mikhailov:** Nothing at all. It is only in the individual that the whole thing exists. So here we are all of one voice. My very last point concerns David's thought experiment and the considerations about death at the end of his paper. Here we see the logic of empiricism in its existential and phenomenological variants (and in its analytical form too). The problem is formulated very naturalistically, very existentially: "It is *I* who am dying." Ah – so Soviet philosophers say – what the dying person does not take into account is that because of what she has done for society, for people, for humanity, she shall remain here for ever, like an Egyptian pyramid, or at least for a remarkably long time . . .

**Davydov:** But it was surely part of the fascination of those pyramids for their creators that their creation gave them immortality, or at least the pyramids were symbols of immortality. And do you know what? I don't like that damned thought experiment. It is quite senseless. You see a logic in it that's simply not there. You've just thought it up yourself. You're so clever, Felix, you've just dreamt it up!

**Mikhailov:** Well, I like it. The crucial thing is that the question of self-consciousness in the issue of 'life-after-life' is the question of whether the subject will be able to *relate to himself* and not just to exist

in some or other way. It is this relation we are anxious to preserve. Human beings are, unfortunately, mortal . . .

**Davydov:** What a discovery! All men are mortal, Socrates is a man . . . (*Laughter*)

**Mikhailov:** That is of course not the point! I just want to say that in death the strong thesis is verified. A human being is the ensemble of social relations because the ability to relate to oneself before, during and after life can be lost *only* if it is possible to lose it during life as well. During life, if a person stops changing himself, stops relating to himself as himself and takes the form of a fossilized, self-satisfied fool for whom everything seems fine from his armchair, then, despite the fact that he is both physically and spiritually before us, there is a sense in which he is already at the edge of the grave. He is a disappearing essence. Maybe his conscience will reawaken some day. Certainly, Tolstoy's 'Death of Ivan Ilych' is very pointed psychologically in this regard. But I can't agree with Vasa that only imaginative fiction treats such questions seriously.

**Bakhurst:** Can you give an example of such a person?

**Mikhailov:** Well, of course I'm not so much speaking theoretically as emotionally. Unfortunately, there are very many examples of people whose conscience is no longer awake, who die during life. They turn into that sort of machine which is only able to . . . Well, on the other hand, it is very complicated psychologically. They perhaps begin to drink, or to take it out on their spouses, but in any case the human essence . . .

**Bibler:** A fine artist would say that there really were no such people.

**Mikhailov:** Well, of course, it cannot be personhood which dies during life. It is terrible and shameful for us to suggest that personhood can die during life because we so desperately want to see it in an individual. And here I go, arguing against myself, but we demand of everyone, even the most fossilized, that they should be persons. We say, "Look, you're now no more than an excuse for a person. But understand that and *be* a person!" It is terrible if we declare of someone that they either are or are not a person, as if this verdict were a closed book.

I remember how a former Director of this Institute once told me the story of a little girl. Sometime ago, somewhere in Minsk, a group of pedagogical scientists (neuropathologists, teachers, psychologists) turned up and began to give the children tests. On the basis of these

tests, one little girl was sent to a remedial school. A teacher from another school who happened to live on the same square as the little girl had known her from early childhood. She went to the local department of education to try to show that the child was quite able, and could do well in a normal school. But science had given its verdict. One surely cannot pick a fight with the highest instantiation of human consciousness. Science had said that the little girl was an idiot. So the teacher went higher – to the Ministry – but everywhere that piece of paper sealed the girl’s fate. Finally, the teacher appealed to the then Director of this Institute. When he got involved, the child was moved to another school, just the one in fact where the concerned teacher was working. And the Director followed the case for seven years. He thought it was interesting as a former geneticist. And the result is, as you have already guessed, very simple. She didn’t become a genius but a normal, active child and did very well. It is the most terrible thing if educationalists relate to children of any age, not as developing persons, but as finite and finished products, as the bearers of some kind of quality which determines their fate: “This one is able, this one not,” “This one is clever, this one stupid,” “This one has a certain pedigree, his genes are of such-and-such a type.” The teacher looks at the child and immediately knows what kind of person stands before him. But the child’s human essence consists in that she relates to herself as to a developing being. It is the mark of a true teacher to appreciate this.

This problem is dramatically posed in the education of blind-deaf pupils. What is so awful now that Meshcheryakov has died? The basic problem is that a stagnant system of evaluation is applied to them, “You’re blind. You’re deaf. By the way, you’re also a bit retarded.” They talk such rubbish because they evaluate the special subjectivity of blind-deaf children by normal criteria. “Therefore (so they go on), apart from sticking down envelopes the future holds nothing for you.” And the blind-deaf are sent off to work in a special organization. And if the organization churns them out for that kind of work it is deemed to be doing its job. “What a wonderful thing! Blind-deaf people are sitting and sticking down envelopes! They are still alive! They haven’t died! Science at work. Wonderful!” But it’s a *nightmare* because these little

boys and girls could be just the same as our own. The very same. That is the human essence, to put it simply.

I've gone on a bit, excuse me.

**Lektorsky:** So Felix and Vasa occupy quite different positions. Davydov has it that personhood develops fairly late, if it develops at all, so that it is wrong to consider the schoolchild a person. And Felix holds that personhood is born with the child, but that it may subsequently be lost. Absolutely counterposed positions.

**Bakhurst:** When I asked for an example of someone who had ceased to be a person, I did so not merely out of curiosity but because I'm interested in what you take the moral status of such an individual to be. If the possession of personhood is a condition of the development of the moral subject (or maybe the emergence of personhood coincides with, or perhaps just is, the emergence of the moral subject, the moral self), then is it possible for someone to lose or to abdicate from their status as a moral subject? And how does morality dictate we treat such people?

**Bibler:** The most important question here is how to understand the claim that, at a certain time, someone can stop being a person.

**Mikhailov:** I was speaking metaphorically, of course.

**Bibler:** If we put the question differently, it may become clearer. Is there ever a point in a person's life where he may claim that he is not responsible for his actions? When he can point to society, or to the orders of the Fuhrer, or to the fact that he is determined by the environment or his genes? No. Never. From birth to death we may never appeal to these things. The heart of the matter is that there is always that 'gap', that non-coincidence with self, thanks to which an individual always answers for his own activity. He becomes himself, and not just a product of the ensemble of social relations.

**Mikhailov:** Moral questions are concrete-historical, socially created problems, yet we are always inclined to place above them some kind of supra-historical moral scheme and talk about the subject's eternal right to life, and so on. In this sense we establish a very strong contradiction between two spheres, which some have tried to capture in a distinction between the ethical and the moral. Anatoli Arsen'ev, for example, has it that there is the sphere of concrete, historically developing moral problems, which find their solutions in particular communities, and an



ethical sphere of eternal, transcendent moral principles. I think this view is misguided. We cannot go into this enormous issue now, but the creation of the moral law from human collective practice – its objectification in the form of a code, its alienation from human practice so that it confronts us as an autonomous entity dictating our actions – is just part of a general theory of objectification, of alienation. Our gross confusion in the face of morality is evidenced by the fact that those who claim that abortion is the killing of a real human being, notoriously hold that we can justify the execution of a criminal by saying that he is ‘already finished’, that he has lost his personhood, by, say, murdering another person. In my view, the question of the convicted murderer is very interesting. I am strongly against the death penalty, but not because I feel it transgresses some transcendent moral law. If I sentence this man to death, then, in the name of society, I put limits on his development as a person. I have said, “He’s a person no longer. He is alive. He breathes. In principle he relates to himself, critically or uncritically. But for breaking certain laws laid down by society I do not consider him a person and I will obliterate him.” How can we seriously justify such an approach? Is personhood some property, conjured up by the influence of the ensemble of social relations, which then goes off on its own, as it were, until one day it disappears, leaving us with a dehumanized shell we can just throw away? Bibler was right to insist that the formation of personhood, of the self, is a continual process. A person cannot lose her essence, that *arche*, that contradiction which stands before her, however much she may capitulate. It is for the community to try to bring that person forth anew. This is the principal business of the community after all. So, to say that one can give up being a person is just a joke, but a very black one in societies which are expert in suppressing personhood and weak at re-engendering it, in calling it back to life.

This would seem a good place to stop.<sup>27</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David Bakhurst, *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy. From the Bolsheviks to Evald Ilyenkov*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> F. T. Mikhailov, *The Riddle of the Self*, Moscow, Progress, 1980. The text is a

translation, by Robert Daglish, of the 2nd (revised) edition of *Zagadka čelovečeskogo ja* (Moscow, Politizdat, 1976). The first edition was published in 1964. I discuss Mikhailov's work in 'Action, Epistemology and *The Riddle of the Self*', *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 24: 185–209, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> See his *Vidy obobščeniya v obučenii*, [*Types of Generalization in Learning*], Moscow, Pedagogika, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> V. S. Bibler, *Myšlenie kak tvorčestvo (Vvedenie v logiku myslennogo dialoga)* [*Thought as Creativity (An Introduction to the dialogical logic of thought)*], Moscow, Politizdat, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> F. T. Mikhailov, *Obščestvennoe soznanie i samosoznanie individa* [*Social Consciousness and the Self-Consciousness of the Individual*], Moscow, Nauka, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> V. S. Bibler, *Ot naukoučeniya – k logike kul'tury. Dva filozofskih vvedeniya v dvatcat' pervyj vek* [*From the Theory of Science – to the Logic of Culture. Two philosophical introductions to the 21st Century*], Moscow, Politizdat, 1991. [In the same year Bibler published two other books: *Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin ili poetika Kul'tury* [Bakhtin or the poetics of Culture], Moscow, Progress, *Kant-Galilej-Kant*, Moscow, Mysl' – Editor's note.]

<sup>7</sup> V. A. Lektorsky, *Sub'ekt, ob'ekt, poznanie*, Moscow, Nauka, 1980. Translated by Sergei Syrovatkin as *Subject, Object, Cognition*, Moscow, Progress, 1984. An interview with Lektorsky about the situation in Russian philosophy on the eve of the failed coup in 1991 appears in David Bakhurst, 'Soviet Philosophy in Transition', *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 44: 33–50, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> V. V. Davydov, *Problemy razvivajuščego obučenija: Opyt teoretičeskogo i eksperimental'nogo psihologičeskogo issledovanija* [*Problems of Instruction and Development: An attempt at theoretical and experimental psychological research*], Moscow, Pedagogika, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> E. V. Ilyenkov, 'Čto že takoe ličnost?' ['What is Personhood?'], in *S čego načinaetsa ličnost* [*Where Personhood Begins*], Moscow, 1979, p. 196.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197–98.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216. Ilyenkov was fascinated by his friend Alexandr Meshcheryakov's work on the education of the blind-deaf, and made a number of (some would say extravagant) claims about its philosophical significance. See Bakhurst, *Consciousness and Revolution*, ch. 7 and David Bakhurst and Carol Padden, 'The Meshcheryakov Experiment: Soviet Work on the Education of the Blind-deaf', *Learning and Instruction*, vol. 1 (1991), pp. 201–15.

<sup>15</sup> Ilyenkov, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>16</sup> See Bernard Williams, 'The Self and the Future', in his *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973.

<sup>17</sup> Frolov, I. T., 'Žizn', smert', i bessmertie' ['Life, Death, and Immortality'], *Voprosy filosofii*, 1983, No. 1, pp. 183–98, and No. 2, pp. 52–64.

<sup>18</sup> E. V. Ilyenkov, 'Psikhika i mozg' ['Mind and Brain'], *Voprosy filosofii*, 1968, No. 11, pp. 145–55.

<sup>19</sup> Davydov himself contributed a chapter to the 1st edition of *S čego načinaetsa ličnost'*, 'Ličnost' nado "vydelat'sa" ['Personhood must be "manufactured"'], pp. 109–39. It was cut from the 2nd revised and expanded edition (1984).

<sup>20</sup> L. N. Tolstoy, 'The Death of Ivan Ilych', in *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories*, London, New English Library, 1960.

<sup>21</sup> Ilyenkov, 'Čto že takoe ličnost?', pp. 196, 197–98.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, *Early Texts*, trans. D. McLellan, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1971, pp. 193–94. I have amended the punctuation of McLellan's translation.

<sup>23</sup> Ilyenkov, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>24</sup> Karl, Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982, p. 144n.

<sup>25</sup> Mikhailov, F. T., 'Predmetnost' dejatel'nosti i predmet psikhologii' ['The Object-orientatedness of activity and the subject of psychology'], in F. T. Mikhailov (ed), *Metodologičeskie problemy psikhologii ličnosti* [*Methodological Problems of the Psychology of Personhood*], Moscow: Akademiya pedagogičeskikh nauk SSSR, Naučno-issledovatel'skij institut obščej pedagogiki, 1981.

<sup>26</sup> E. V. Ilyenkov, 'Gegel' i germenevtika (Problema otnošenija jazyka i myšlenija v koncepcii Gegelja)' ['Hegel and hermeneutics (The problem of the relation of language and thought in Hegel's philosophy)'], *Voprosy filosofii*, 1974, No. 8.

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