On the Soul: Ilyenkov's Theory of Personality

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A person is not born with inherent qualities; their body and mind are formed through experience and social activity.[1] Ilyenkov's philosophy can be distilled into one question: Where does the mind come from?[2] Or, as he put it in his last essay, written just before his death in 1979: What is "personality" and where does it come from?[3] Reading Ilyenkov alongside with Aristotle, David Bakhurst argues that "a human life is marked by *Bildung*, by the formation of reason."[4] He describes this formation as "the unity of the rational and the animal in our nature."[5] In this process of formation, the subject acquires "the power to decide what to do in light of what there is most reason to do."[6] This ability to act in the light of reason can be aligned with Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* or practical wisdom.[7] Phronesis is not just a socially conditioned behavior but the social capacity for activity, one that has to be acquired. With Ilyenkov, one can say that *phronesis* is the creative capacity of a fully realized personality. In *What is Personality?*, Ilyenkov seeks to reconceptualize personality, suited to the active and collectively entangled subject of communism. Rather than person, subject or individual, Ilyenkov resorts to the notion of personality (*lichnost'*) which he defines as non-individual and yet truly singular. Just like there are no perfectly identical leaves, water droplets, or electrons, no personalities are the same.[8] The Russian notion of *lichnost'* radically differs from a Western individualist conception of *person* as derived from Roman law.[9] Rather than *persona* (from Latin, mask), *lichnost'* evokes the face, a physiognomical theme that plays an important role in Ilyenkov's essay:

> And it also happens that the mask becomes so firmly affixed to a person's face that they are no longer able to tear it off. And then the mask begins to replace their own personality (if, of course, such existed), while the former personality slowly atrophies from disuse, turning into a ghost of memory, into self-deception. … And if life does manage to tear this mask off

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1 This chapter emerges from my talks at conferences in 2024, including *Images of the Ideal. Evald Ilyenkov at 100* in Berlin, David Bakhurst's book panel in London, and a roundtable in Boston. My argument was greatly shaped by the discussion at those events. Earlier drafts have been read and commented by Trevor Wilson, Martin Küpper, Ivan Landa, Kyrill Potapov, Vesa Oittinen, Sascha Freyberg, Alexei Penzin, Giorgi Kobakhidze, and Samet Yalçın. I am truly grateful for their feedback and constructive criticism, as well as for the many conversations within the Ilyenkov community over the years, whose lively soul this chapter hopes to reflect.

2 See Evald Ilyenkov, "Otkuda beret'sia um?", *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. 5, 294–314. Moscow: Kanon+, 2021.

3 Evald Ilyenkov, "Chto zhe takoe lichnost'?", *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. 5, 385–426. Moscow: Kanon+, 2021, p. 385; this and all following translations from Russian and German are mine.

4 David Bakhurst, *The Heart of the Matter: Ilyenkov, Vygotsky and the Courage of Thought*. Leiden: Brill: 2023, p. 327. Despite Bakhurst and my own attempts to bring Ilyenkov in dialogue with the Aristotelian tradition, it is important to note that Ilyenkov's dialectical logic explicitly breaks with Aristotle while turning toward Hegel, as Sascha Freyberg has remarked.

5 Bakhurst 2023, p. 349. On the role of nonhuman agency in Ilyenkov's work, see Isabel Jacobs, "Evald Ilyenkov's Ecology of Personality", *Journal of the History of Ideas Blog* (November 2023).

6 Bakhurst 2023, p. 352.

7 See, for instance, Aritstotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

8 Ivan Landa has pointed out that such a notion of personality as both particular and universal resembles the Hegelian Concept, as something unique (individual) that is not reducible to others (particular), and at the same time general as to pertain to all persons (universal). It was precisely this aspect of universality that fascinated Ilyenkov, whether in his conception of ideal, culture, or sociality, all closely linked to activity.

9 For an excellent recent study on Russian concepts of personality, see Nikolai Plotnikov, *Konzepte der ‚Person' in der russischen Ideengeschichte. Studien zum interkulturellen Begriffstransfer*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2024.

> a person, an even more nightmarish image emerges: the mask is gone, and beneath and behind it, the person's own face is gone entirely. A person without a face is like a clock without hands – a formless mass, a biochemistry of flesh.[10]

While the face expresses personality, the mask conceals. For Ilyenkov, there is no person without a face, only formless flesh.[11] Those lines were inspired by Ingmar Bergman's *The Silence* (1963), which Ilyenkov describes as illustrating the terrifying "situation of absolute loneliness in a crowd, [with] people arriving in a strange city where no one understands their native language, where they cannot convey even the simplest things to anyone, where no one cares about their personality because no one simply sees it, hears it, or feels it."[12] Ilyenkov asks, with regards to Bergman's film: "Is it because there are no mutually understandable means of communication between personalities? Or is it because there is no personality on either side at all?"[13] Another film by Bergman offers a key to unlocking Ilyenkov's essay, *Persona* (1966), which deals with several themes that were of great interest to Ilyenkov: life without language, the duality of personhood, talking hands, and identity as a mirroring of the other.

1. "I" and "non-I"

Drawing from his work with deaf-blind children in the "Zagorsk Experiment," Ilyenkov's materialist philosophy confronts a fundamental question: Where does the mind come from in persons deprived of essential senses like sight and hearing? For him, deaf-blind children were living proof that personality arises from social interaction, not essentialist features.[14] The mind is shaped by engagement with objects created by human hands, such as tools, and through interaction with

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[10] Lichnost, p. 420.

[11] This seems the only passage in Ilyenkov's work where the distinction between mask (*persona*) and face (*litso*) constitutes personality (*lichnost'*). As Ivan Landa stressed, one is struck by the strong normative undertone in Ilyenkov's distinction between mask and face which suggests that only human beings (or animals with a face) are authentic persons. It also somewhat waters down Ilyenkov's emphasis on the sociality of personhood, making a simplistic distinction between an inner true self and a social role. If masks are social costumes worn in society, Ilyenkov warns, people might lose their personality – when mask and face become indistinguishable. Landa rightly suggests a link to Marx's concepts of alienation and reification, as well as his discussion of fetishism in the first volume of *Capital*. If a person without a face is like a clock without hands, what is left of the individual once the mask is removed? Ilyenkov would say, as Landa put it, in the best case, we arrive at a "face", in the worst, an amorphous nothing. Samet Yalçın has additionally pointed out the significance of skin for Ilyenkov's notion of the face and his philosophy of touch. Neither inside nor outside, skin deconstruct the simple binarism between inner personality and outer mask. Another reading might embed Ilyenkov's concept of the face in larger debates around expression, embodiment, and physiognomy, which had a revival from the 1920s onwards. See Anca Parvulescu's recent book *Face and Form: Physiognomy in Literary Modernism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., p. 420f.

[14] Their sense of touch, however, importantly remained intact, maybe even intensified, which explains Ilyenkov's interest in the hand as the organ of touch. As Landa emphasized, in Ilyenkov's sensuous epistemology, the acquisition of personality, language, and culture still presupposes some (remaining) physiological senses and implies the cultivation of those senses. Touch might be able to substitute other senses, such as sight and hearing, turning into a social sense organ. If we had no senses at all – if we were Leibniz's mondas without window, as Landa put it – there would be no mind nor a human body.

Still from Ingmar Bergman, *Persona* (1966).

other people.[15] In Zagorsk, Ilyenkov and his colleagues experimented with various ways of communicating through the touch of their hands and tactile machines. In such material encounters, the brain is molded into an organ of thinking. Language, too, is not born within an individual mind, but emerges from culture as a complex system of communal activity. The Zagorsk Experiment served as a testing ground for Ilyenkov's ideas. The essay "Where Does the Mind Come From?" recalls how one of his students, Alexander Suvorov, was asked a question upon giving a talk:

> "Your case contradicts the old premise of materialism, according to which all that gets into the mind is necessarily developed and provided by the senses. If your senses are damaged, if you cannot hear or see, how could your mind develop?" The question was transmitted to Suvorov via tactile alphabet, and he answered into the microphone: "And why do you think that we do not hear and see? We are not blind and deaf, we see and hear by the eyes of all our friends, all people, all humankind."[16]

A person can only see through the eyes of another. Thinking is a communal activity, "not a mental act that is taking place in the skull of the individual, in the secret spaces of the brain's grey matter."[17] Thinking manifests itself in "the entire 'non-organic human body' that stands objectively over and against an individual human being, the body of civilization, including tools and temples, statues and offices, factories and political organizations, ships and toys – all that with which we are

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15 Ilyenkov was very much aware of the scientific and biological discourse of his time, as well as critical of physicalist theories of thinking and perception. See for instance, Evald Ilyenkov, "Mind and Brain (An Answer to D. I. Dubrovskii)," *Soviet Studies in Philosophy*, 8:1, pp. 87–106 (1969). Kyrill Potapov has emphasized how far Ilyenkov's conception of thinking breaks with Lenin's reflection theory while also engaging with the mechanism-vitalism debate. As Potapov has remarked, Ilyenkov's theory of the soul might even stray away from a more traditional activity framework, in particular Aleksei Leontiev. On implications of the Zagorsk experiment for Ilyenkov's materialism, see Vesa Oittinen, "Ilyenkov and the Shadow of Helvetius," in *Activity Theory: An Introduction*, edited by Alex Levant, Kyoko Murakami, and Miriam McSweeney, Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2024, pp. 97–111. While Oittinen argues for Ilyenkov's return to eighteenth century sensualism, my paper emphasizes the importance of conceptions of active matter from the tradition of the Aristotelian Left.

16 Cited in Keti Chukhrov,"The philosophical disability of reason: Evald Ilyenkov's critique of machinic intelligence," *Radical Philosophy* 2.07 (2020), p. 70.

17 Evald Ilyenkov, *Intelligent Materialism: Essays on Hegel and Dialectics*. Ed. and trans. Evgeni V. Pavlov. Leiden; Brill, 2019, p. 53.

involved from the moment we are born and enter the human family."[18] In other words, the "I" is initiated to itself by a collective "non-I," materially embodied in cultural objects and ideals. One is not born a person but becomes one.[19]

The plot of Bergman's *Persona* is driven by the interplay of two women who look strikingly similar: the young nurse Alma cares for the actress Elisabet who suddenly became mute. The boundaries between the two soon blur. One speaking, the other mute, they mirror each other in gestures, with their faces and hands often superimposed. Bergman's strategy of doubling culminates in a scene that is repeated twice, narrated from each woman's perspective. The doubled sequence is connected by a shot of their hands intertwining on the table, a gesture of speaking without language. While their bodies and identities seem merged, the repetition also emphasises an existential rift between them. As Bergman put it: "What someone is saying is not the same as what the other one is hearing."[20] From Bergman's films, Ilyenkov took the idea that personality is dual rather than individual. Personality is multilayered and interconnected, situated not "inside" the head but formed through and within collective activity. I is always "outside" of myself, embodying my essence in relation to others. "I" only takes shape with and through "non-I." To borrow another key concept from Ilyenkov, personality is a collective *thinking body*, interweaving the subject with their environment and with others:

> Personality (*lichnost'*) not only exists, but is born for the first time as a "knot" (*uzelok*), tied in a network of mutual relations that arise between individuals in the process of collective activity (labour) …. Personality is the totality of a person's relations to themselves as to some "other" – the relation of the "I" to itself as to some "non-I." Therefore, its "body" is not a separate body of the species "Homo sapiens," but at least two such bodies – "I" and "you," merged as if they were in one body of social and human ties, relations, interrelations.[21]

"I" is not simply there but arises from a process of formation. I am the collective interactivity of becoming myself in another, as non-I: "Personality, therefore, is born, comes into being (and does not merely manifest itself!) in the space of real interaction between at least *two* individuals, connected with each other through things and the materially embodied actions involving those things."[22] Just as Alma and Elisabet form the dual subject of *Persona*, Ilyenkov's concept of personality is a split or doubled "I," a multitude rather than an individual. Ilyenkov cites a footnote from the first chapter ("Commodities and Money") of Marx's *Capital*, Volume I: "Since he comes into the world neither with a looking glass in his hand, nor as a Fichtian philosopher, to whom 'I am I' is sufficient, man first sees and recognises himself in other men."[23] Peter forms his identity by mirroring himself in Paul. Only by relating to Paul, Ilyenkov writes, does Peter relate to himself as a person. The "object-mediated, bodily relationship" between Peter and Paul becomes "mutually

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[18] Ilyenkov, *Intelligent Materialism*, p. 13.

[19] Unlike existentialist philosophy, however, Ilyenkov's social theory of personality emphasises that it is not the I that shapes itself but its interactions with others from which personally emerges.

[20] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIKByxTU2nA (Accessed 10 August 2025).

[21] Ilyenkov, "Chto zhe takoe lichnost'?", p. 393f.

[22] Ibid., p. 410f.

[23] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I, Book One: The Process of Production of Capital*. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf (Accessed: 14 August 2015), p. 55.

active" as Peter matures, now able to recognise himself as Peter and Paul as Paul.[24] Only if both halves are active can their relationship become real, "and not merely a 'relationship' as it exists in the system of feelings and self-conceptions of one participant, whether Peter or Paul."[25] In other words, personality is an active relationship of mutual recognition.[26] The dialectical formation of personality is a role-play whose rules are invented in the very act of playing, as the game gradually unfolds. This game, Ilyenkov argues, can only be played in socialist society, when every living person has the chance to become a personality.

2. Where Does the Soul Come From?

In the essay on personality, Ilyenkov associates the concept with what is "sometimes old-fashionedly called the 'soul' – that very 'soul' which each person knows as their 'self', as something uniquely unrepeatable, irreducible to any common constituent parts and, therefore, fundamentally eluding scientific-theoretical definitions and even inexpressible in words."[27] The soul arises from the dialogical and mirroring interrelation between two personalities: "one soul confronts another only as a set of its own *palpably-embodied, directly-material manifestations* – at least in the form of gestures, facial expressions, words or actions."[28] Not itself material, the soul is manifested in corporeal expressions, projecting itself on matter. Instead of rejecting the term soul, as one would expect from a materialist, Ilyenkov calls for a *science of the soul*.[29] Such materialist psychology approaches the problem of personality without reducing it to "brain physiology or biochemistry, cybernetics or information theory," which, for Ilyenkov, amount to "pseudomaterialism under the mask of which lurks physiological idealism."[30] A materialist theory of personality is situated at the threshold of matter and mind. Personality cannot be found by studying neuron activity or looking at brain morphology. Ilyenkov strategically used the "old-fashioned" concept of the soul to carve out a precarious space that is neither entirely material nor ideal.[31] The soul marks a subtle gap between the human self and a mere reduction of mind to matter.

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[24] Ilyenkov, "Chto zhe takoe lichnost'?", p. 411.

[25] Ibid.

[26] The subject of recognition, a key theme in Hegel's philosophy, is central to Ilyenkov's theory of personality: a person is only a "king," Ilyenkov cites Marx, because other people relate to him as "subjects." Simultaneously, they consider themselves "subjects" only because he is a "king" (ibid.). Trevor Wilson has rightly emphasised a certain tension in Ilyenkov's theory of recognition between duality, collectivity, and the self. Rather than a rope (two ends), the knot (endless ends) is an image of collective entanglement that necessarily involves multiplicity (concreteness as the unity of the multiple).

[27] Ilyenkov, "Chto zhe takoe lichnost'?", p. 386. Throughout his writings, Ilyenkov uses the word soul (*dusha*) in sharp distinction from spirit (*dukh*).

[28] Ilyenkov, Dialectics of the Ideal, p. 34.

[29] Ilyenkov, "Chto zhe takoe lichnost'?", p. 390.

[30] Ilyenkov, "Chto zhe takoe lichnost'?", p. 390.

[31] Martin Küpper has remarked on the importance of *Stofflichkeit* in such a materialism. Also see Maria Chehonadskih, "The Stofflichkeit of the Universe: Alexander Bogdanov and the Soviet Avant-Garde," *e-flux Journal* 88 (February 2018). More research is needed on notions of the soul in earlier Soviet materialism, importantly Platonov's writings where the soul occupies a key place. In *Happy Moscow*, for instance, the soul is somatized in various body parts, such as the spinal cord, becoming both an organ of cognition and the body's spiritual center. It would also be interesting to read Platonov's *Soul* (Dzhan) in dialogue with concepts of the soul in the Aristotelian Left.

This liminal space leads us into, to borrow one of Ilyenkov's favourite expressions, the *heart of the matter*, of a materialist-dialectical and anti-Cartesian concept of soul.[32]

Like personality, the soul is born from social interaction, materially bound to other souls as if by an umbilical cord. It is located not "inside an individual body, but precisely outside it – in the system of real relationships of this individual body with another body, through things situated in the space between them, binding them 'as if into one body', governed 'as if by one soul'."[33] The soul is an ensemble of people, formed through dialogical and active interrelation.[34] The soul is "a 'body' created not by nature, but by human labour, which transforms that nature into its own 'inorganic body'."[35] It is not material itself but materialises through the networks of relations between individuals in the process of their collective activity. Like personality, the soul has a dual body, "I" and "you," merged as if into one body. What Ilyenkov calls soul is, thus, not an inner self but given to us through and shaped by collective activity. The soul is materially realized through life-activity, what Aristotle called *phronesis* or practical wisdom.

Aristotle is an important influence behind Ilyenkov's conception of soul. However, his own theory of soul is dialectical and materialist, radicalising Aristotle by ways of Spinoza and Marx's somatic materialism. Ilyenkov's philosophy of the soul resonates with an earlier tradition of Aristotelianism that Ernst Bloch dubbed the "Aristotelian Left." In *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* (1952), Bloch proposed the term to describe a line of materialist thinking leading from Aristotle through medieval Arabic philosophy to Giordano Bruno.[36] The Aristotelian Left was mainly made up of Islamicate philosophers, in particular Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). For Bloch, they infused Aristotle's notion of matter with an energetic materialism, transforming it from passive receptivity into active potentiality. The Aristotelian Left locates activity within matter itself, preparing the ground for Marx's theory of labour, which attributes to human activity the power to transform the world. Bloch's account can be complemented by Soviet Marxist attempts at an alternative, anti-bourgeois history of Western philosophy, from Aristotle to *Diamat*, with a left line of transmission through Averroism.[37]

Though lesser known today, theories of an Aristotelian Left that culminated in Soviet philosophy were very much in the air in the 1960s. East German philosopher Hermann Ley's *Studies on the History of Materialism in the Middle Ages*, first published in 1957, appearing in Russian in 1962, advanced a distinctly Marxist historiography of medieval thought.[38] Within Soviet scholarship it was Orest Trakhtenberg's *Studies on the History of Western European Medieval Philosophy* (1957) that inaugurated a wave of studies on left Aristotelianism which emphasizes an active conception of matter, drawing in particular from Ibn Rushd. In their entry on "Matter" in the

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[32] The term *heart* adds an interesting semantic field, closely related to the soul as both spiritual and somatic centre of the body. In *Dialectics of the Ideal*, Ilyenkov writes that "the physically interpreted 'soul'" was ascribed to different organs, "heart, liver or brain" (Evald Ilyenkov, "Dialectics of the Ideal," in Dialectics of the Ideal: Evald Ilyenkov and Creative Soviet Marxism, Boston; Leiden: Brill, 2013, p. 49).

[33] Ilyenkov, "Chto zhe takoe lichnost'?", p. 394.

[34] Yalçın suggested another link to the Aristotelian Left, transmitted through medieval Turkish and Persian poetry, especially discussions of the soul (or *jan*) in Sufi texts, which discuss the absolute as *Janan*, the multitude or "ensemble" of all living beings (or *jans*).

[35] Ibid., p. 393.

[36] Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

[37] See Iva Manova, "'From Aristotle, Through Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd to Dialectical Materialism': Soviet Approaches Towards the History of Medieval Philosophy in the 1950s and 1960s." *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 2 (2018), pp. 295–308. It is important to also note that Ley was highly critical of Bloch's account.

[38] Manova 2018, p. 296.

Soviet Philosophical Encyclopedia, published between 1960–70, Vladimir Bibler and N. Ovtsinnikov claim that "only Averroes … and John Duns Scotus tried to make the active force – thought – immanent to matter."[39] It is this intelligent materialism, in which matter actively produces and forms thought, that reverberates in Ilyenkov's philosophy as one extension of what can be termed a "Soviet Aristotelian Left." One of the main concepts in the Aristotelian Left is *dynameion* which Bloch translates as the "Being-in-possiblity" of matter as dynamic and active potentiality.[40] This view turns Aristotle on his head whose hylomorphism, a theory stating that every physical object is a compound of matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*). Aristotle compared the being-in-possibility of matter with wax that passively absorbs an active form. Just as the wax is shaped by form, the body is the matter of the soul as its active form: body and soul are one like the wax and its shape.[41]

There is, however, an important distinction between bodies and matter in Aristotle's hylomorphism. The wax merely receives its form, for instance the seal of a signet ring or a candle.[42] Aristotle argues in *On the Soul (De Anima)* that matter is both smooth and plastic: "if someone were to dip something into wax, the wax would be moved up to the point where he had dipped it."[43] The wax can take up all sorts of different forms, whereas the body is only a body when ensouled, defined as body by its soul. In the Aristotelian Left, by contrast, both form and matter, body and soul are active agents. Active matter is tied to the belief that the thinking soul is connected with the organic body as one indivisible active form. For Ibn Rushd, for instance, the soul thinks through the body; put differently, the active potentiality of matter itself thinks. This thinking body, for both Ibn Rushd and Ilyenkov, is not individual but collective. Everything emanates from active matter in a spiral movement. There are no souls without matter, and no matter without souls. Matter lies somewhere halfway, between potentiality and actuality, body and soul. From stones and plants to human thinking, Ilyenkov insists in "Cosmology of the Spirit" that everything is connected by universal thinking matter.[44]

The active materialism of the Aristotelian Left resonates with Ilyenkov's theory of the soul as a collective and active thinking body. Not coincidentally, Marx's own excerpts of Aristotle's *On the Soul* were published in 1976, shortly before Ilyenkov worked on his text on personality.[45] Marx's notes begin with the concept of αφή (touch), defining it as "sense of abstract materiality."[46] With regard to Aristotle's theory of the intellectual soul, Marx emphasises the somatic nature of thinking, while following Aristotle in distinguishing body (Fleisch) from matter (ύλη). Thinking without materiality, Marx writes, is as impossible as bodies without a soul. The soul is "the place of forms,"[47] vacuous and pure potentiality without its body. The soul "thinks the abstract, like the

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[39] Vladimir Bibler and N. Ovcinnikov, "Matter," in: *Themes in Soviet Marxist Philosophy: Selected Articles from the "Filosofskaja Enciklopedija"*, edited by T.J. Blakeley. Dordrecht/Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1975, p. 49.

[40] Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, p. Xviii.

[41] Aristotle, *De Anima*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016, p. 23.

[42] Ibid., p. 48.

[43] Ibid., p. 72.

[44] See Evald Ilyenkov, "Cosmology of the Spirit." Stasis 5, 2 (2017), pp. 164–190.

[45] Karl Marx, "Exzerpte aus Aristoteles: De anima," in: Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), Vierte Abteilung: Exzerpte, Notizen, Marginalien Band 1. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1976. Franz Heilgendorff pointed me to Marx's excerpts.

[46] Marx, "Exzerpte," p. 156.

[47] Marx, p. 162.

σιμόν, (the concrete cavity of the nose), not as such, but insofar as it is a hollow (κοίλον), without the flesh in which the hollow sits."[48] Another reader of Marx's excerpts on the soul was Ilyenkov's friend and student Helmut Seidel, whose *Aristoteles und der Ausgang der antiken Philosophie* (1984) undertook an original reading of Aristotle in the light of Lenin and Marx.[49]

Seidel pays special attention to the relationship between form and matter in Aristotle, arguing that "all reality is shaped matter [*Stoff*], possibility that has been realized."[50] By form (εἶδος) or shape (μορφή), Seidel writes, Aristotle understands "the essence of a thing, its concept, the cause of its coming-to-be and its being, the active (shaping) principle, the purposive force (ἐντελέχεια) that determines the nature of the thing."[51] Matter, on the other hand, is "the being-in-possibility [*In-Möglichkeit-Seiende*], […] a force that resists the working of form."[52] In other words, matter is not passive but engaged in a dialectical interplay of activity and passivity; there is never an absence of activity but everything is activity. Turning away from Plato's theory of form, it was Aristotle who redefined activated matter to active matter. The wax actively shapes its form in unity with matter. Similarly, "the becoming-real [*Real-Werden*]" of the marble statue is "the joining [*Verbinden*] of matter and form."[53] Form realizes itself in matter as active potentiality. The union of matter and form is reflected in Aristotle's conception of the soul, which Seidel illustrates using the example of the human eye:

> The power of sight as the soul of the eye and the eye as the matter of sight condition each other. Just as it is obvious to Aristotle that the eye is truly an eye only insofar as it is active, namely in seeing, it is also clear that the destruction of the eye as the matter of sight entails the loss of sight. From this it follows that 'the soul is not separable from the body.'[54]

Ilyenkov's theory of the soul points to a similar interweaving of matter and thinking, the becoming-intelligent of matter. In his writings, the soul often occupies the same ambiguous position as his notion of the ideal: it is not itself material, yet it materializes. The ideal is more than just another theory of form; rather it is already the active joining of matter and form that is at stake in Seidel's Marxist reading of Aristotle. The soul is a useful term for Ilyenkov, since it faces the same issues in Idealist or "bourgeois" philosophy that the category of the ideal poses for dialectical materialism. In other words, the ideal occupies a similar position in Ilyenkov's system as the soul in a left Aristotelian somatic materialism. It is neither material nor immaterial, both form and active matter. The soul, like the ideal, switches on, that is, activates and energises Ilyenkov's dialectical materialism: "This mystical, mysterious reality does not have its own material body, which is why it easily changes one material form of its incarnation for another, persisting in all of its 'incarnations' and 'metamorphoses', and even increasing with this its own 'incorporeal body', controlling the fate and movement of all those individual bodies that it inhabits, in which it temporarily 'materialises',

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[48] Ibid., p. 169.

[49] Helmut Seidel, *Aristoteles und der Ausgang der antiken Philosophie*, Dietz Verlag Berlin 1984.

[50] Seidel, p. 38.

[51] Ibid., p. 37f.

[52] Ibid., p. 41.

[53] Ibid., p. 42.

[54] Ibid., p. 61.

including the human body."[55] In *Dialectics of the Ideal*, Ilyenkov argues that the soul is "an objective form of movement of physical corporeal bodies, despite its obvious incorporeality."[56] It is "a form, like some immaterial [*бесплотная*] yet all-powerful 'soul' of things. A form that preserves itself in the most diverse corporeal incarnations and does not coincide with any of them. A form of which it cannot be said where exactly it 'exists'. Everywhere and nowhere in particular."[57] The soul is incorporeal yet moves material bodies.

3. Thinking Hands

This ambiguous space of transmaterial liminality becomes central in *On Idols and Ideals* (1968), where Ilyenkov draws on Aristotle's theory of the soul to articulate the specificity of human thinking threatened by attempts to build artificial intelligence, or what he calls thinking machines.[58] Ilyenkov argues that humans are defined by their "capacity for any kind of 'identification' [*otozhdestvlenie*] for the production of any particular abstraction, which enabled Aristotle to call 'reason' ('the thinking soul') the form of forms."[59] This thinking soul is what the Aristotelian Left has called the *agent intellect*, a universal form situated neither within the soul nor in the material world. It is located, as it were, halfway between spirit and matter. The soul is characterised by its "capacity to deal with anything according its own logic, rather than an *a priori* imposed scheme or a pre-encoded stamp of action fixed in the hand or in the mind."[60] In other words, the ability to think marks an openness to the logic of another, a non-I. Peter only begins to think when encountering the logic of Paul, rather than acting upon pre-determined patterns in his hands and mind. A thinking soul, Ilyenkov concludes, can never be artificially reproduced, for machines cannot creatively engage with any logic other than their own.[61] Artificial intelligence would not only need to materially recreate a collective thinking body but a whole machine civilization in order to think.

Detached from social activity, the machine is soulless and devoid of thinking. In his critique of cybernetics, written at the same time, Gotthard Günther argues that the soul is nothing but another expression for "the 'living', that is, self-reflective identity of an 'I' that explicitly sets itself apart from being."[62] In other words, everything that is not a thing is "soul." It sets a limit to the thing-world, an ideal space that the living subject carves out for itself and others, not as an inner

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[55] Evald Ilyenkov, "Dialectics of the Ideal," p. 25.

[56] Ilyenkov, "Dialectics of the Ideal," p. 63.

[57] Ibid.

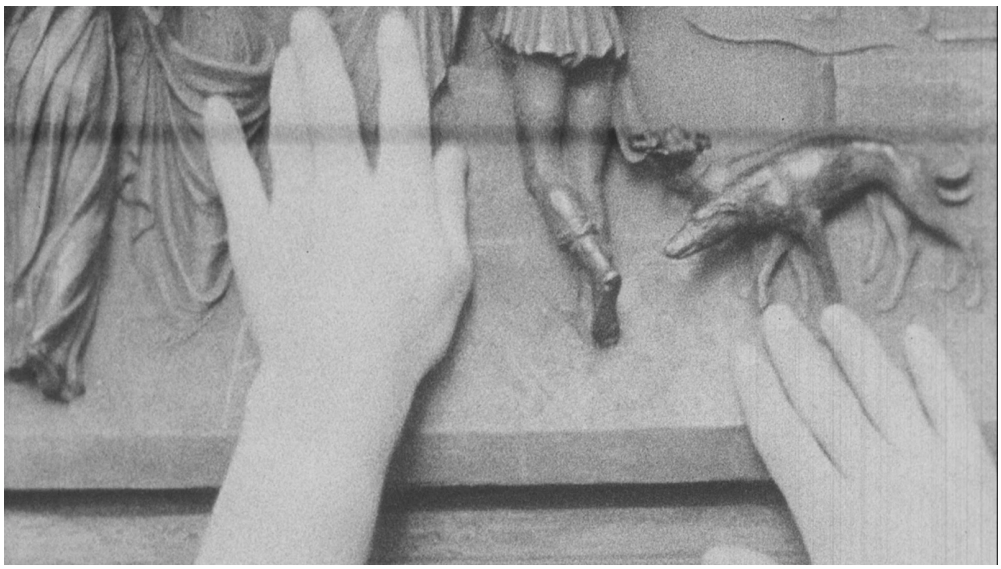
[58] On Ilyenkov's critique of cybernetics, see Trevor Wilson's chapter in this book.

[59] Ilyenkov, "Ob idolakh i idealakh." Ideal'. In *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. 3, 273–495. Moscow: Kanon+, 2020, p. 472.

[60] Ibid., p. 473.

[61] There is a striking dialogue between Ilyenkov's critique of machinic capitalism and how Günther Anders has employed the notion of the soul to describe the erosion of human life under late capitalist conditions. See Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*. Munich C.H Beck, 1961. For Anders, capitalism is stage of total idealism; the *thing-form* has become immaterial. In times of mass production, only the ideal of an object, its pre-encoded blueprint exists. As his example goes, the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been produced because of immaterial *blueprints* that made possible an endless number of reproductions of those bombs. The material object that emerges from this production processes is already obsolete. No bomb can be dropped twice; it is a consumable object. Interestingly, Anders's father William Stern, a specialist in child development, was widely read in the young Soviet Union, influencing in particular Lev Vygotsky.

[62] Gotthard Günther, *Das Bewußtsein der Maschinen: Eine Metaphysik der Kybernetik* (Krefeld/Baden-Baden: Agis-Verlag, 1963), p. 40.



Still from Emanuel Almborg, *Talking Hands* (2016).

self but as self-reflective relationality (*Vermittlung*).[63] As Günther put it: "The soul, then – or whatever one may choose to call that mysterious metaphysical borderline case – is never measured with a tape measure."[64] With Ilyenkov, one can say that the soul is that what escapes materiality while itself enabling materializing processes. Where the thing has identity, Günther argues, the soul has "reflection-identity" (*Reflexionsidentität*).[65] Like the ideal, the soul is that which mediates between the human mind and the world of labour. The soul is always broken, dual, self-reflecting, not passive potentiality but active self-formation.[66]

Where Ilyenkov emphasises the unique ability of the thinking soul to engage with alterity, Günther's focus lies on the centrality of mediation as "the core of transcendental-dialectical logic."[67] A thinking machine can never mediate between humans and nature, it is only the human that can mediate nature through the machine. Dialectical materialism transcends the divide between idealism and materialism by foregrounding the self-reflexive activity of matter. "Whether one calls that metaphysical X God, soul, spirit, or self-reflecting matter," Günther writes, "makes no difference."[68] For Ilyenkov, this metaphysical X, the soul or ideal, is that which transforms nature into second nature, in other words, creates culture. The ideal, like the soul, is an active, concrete, and materializing mould on the boundary of the material and the ideal. Ideals exist beyond and outside the human head, standing "in opposition to the individual (the physical body of the

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[63] See Günther 1963, p. 41.

[64] Ibid., p. 35.

[65] Ibid., p. 50.

[66] In a particularly interesting section in his book on cybernetics, Günther explores the difference between conceptions of matter in dialectical materialism and animism. When ensouled, he claims, matter becomes self-reflection, as in *tjurunga*, the sacred stone or wood (*Seelenholz*) in Central Australian Aboriginal culture: "In this faith, the supposedly dead thing *is* already, in fact, reflection and vitality. … What dialectical materialism shares with this old belief is that it attributes properties of reflection to materiality or thingness [*Dingheit*] as such. But there comes the difference, and it is an extremely essential one: this property of reflection within materiality only comes to light through the world being worked upon and transformed" (p. 107). Dialectical materialism is not enchanted animism but a theory of the union of matter and form within the process of human labour.

[67] Ibid., p. 110. Günther draws explicitly on I. B. Novik's work in *Cybernetics at the Service of Communism* (1961), one of the first collections on cybernetics in the Soviet Union (see p. 109f.).

[68] Ibid., p. 120.

individual with his brain, liver, heart, hands and other organs)."[69] Ideals mediate human activity which transforms nature through labour, using hands and tools. For Ilyenkov, the ideal is a "value-form of the products of labour in general."[70] Citing from Marx's *Capital*, Ilyenkov writes that value is "a form distinguished from its tangible [*handgreiflich*], real body shape [*Körperform*], therefore only an ideal or imagined form."[71] The ideal plays a key role in the labour process that transforms the material of nature with hands and brains.[72]

The motif of the hand as a supreme organ of human thinking and mediation, associated with the soul, is central in Ilyenkov's philosophy of personality. Hands played a key role in Soviet avantgarde conceptions of language, embodiment, and the formation of socialist subjectivity.[73] Inspired by Nikolai Marr's Japhetic theory of the origin of language and Wolfgang Köhler's animal experiments, Lev Vygotsky stated in the 1920s that "the transitional forms between grasping and pointing in chimpanzees" were "a genetic hinge" in the development towards human language.[74] Vygotsky argued that humans can speak and think only because of their hands. The hand as a unique cultural tool also featured in attempts to condition, optimize, and control manual labour processes, such as Alexei Gastev's exercises to improve the elasticity and dexterity of workers' hands.[75] The coupling of labour and embodied language in Soviet theories of the human hand suggests "that language is rooted in the tool, and the tool is rooted in the hand."[76] The grasping, pointing, and labouring hand was considered the supreme organ of the Soviet worker, harking back to Aristotle's definition of the hand as the ultimate tool in *De Anima*. For Aristotle, "the soul is just as the hand is; for the hand is a tool of tools (*organon pro organon*), and reason is a form of forms, and perception a form of the objects of perception."[77] The hand is more than just the sum of its fingers and knuckles: just like the soul, it is a highly plastic organ of thinking, constantly producing forms. As Seidel put it in his commentary on Aristotle, the hand is the "form of forms,"[78] it is the the origin of all forms, just as all tools emerge from the hand as the primordial tool. Citing Aristotle, Seidel argues that thinking is pure form, "like the hand is the tool of all tools."[79] Grounded in object-oriented activities, from grasping and touching to pointing, thinking is hand-work. Like the soul, the hand contains all forms of what can be thought and seen, everything that exists, not the things themselves but their forms. In his excerpts on Aristotle's *De Anima*, Marx paid special

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69 *Dialectics of the Ideal*, p. 51.

70 Ibid., p. 57.

71 Ibid., p. 56.

72 Ibid., p. 76.

73 See Susanne Strätling, *The hand at work: the poetics of poiesis in the Russian avant-garde*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021.

74 Strätling, *The hand at work*, p. 23.

75 Ibid., p. xi. Gastev was particularly fascinated by the technique of the striking hand in the rhythmic act of hammering (Strätling, p. 159).

76 Ibid., p. 26.

77 Aristotle, *De Anima*, p. 65.

78 Seidel, *Aristoteles*, p. 47.

79 Ibid.

attention to the touch of the hand as the "organ of organs."[80] Both soul and hand are organs of "the sensation of the perceived forms."[81]

Body and soul are not separate but nourish each other, Aristotle writes, "just as that by which one steers is both the hand and the rudder, the one both producing movement and itself moving, and the other merely moving."[82] In the hand, the material and the ideal come together, as in one "articulation [*Eingelenkung*] of the bones," as Marx described it, "where the protrusion of the one fits into the hollowing of the other."[83] Similarly, in Ilyenkov's enactive conception of thinking, body and soul, hand and mind enter one process of social activity. As Emanuel Almborg's film *Talking Hands* (2016) captures, in Zagorsk Ilyenkov experimented with forms of talking without language, aiming to dissolve the fragmentation of the division of labour in an embodied process of learning centred around the hand. Ilyenkov's lifework was dedicated to reassembling a collective thinking body which sees through the eyes and touch through the hands of all people. For Ilyenkov, only communism gives people "the freedom to dispose of their own hands and minds."[84] Under capitalist conditions, the energy of the entire human body is consumed, hands, brain, and nerves. Some people work all their life "with their head" while others work "with their hands." Even this fragmentation might be optimized further by capitalists, demanding "hands, for whom it would be useful to divide its tasks between the Right and the Left, and then move on to more dispersed tasks with the Pinky and Index fingers, and so on."[85] Fragmented by the division of labour, the alienated subject of capitalism is not a personality but a thing: "And if, in such a case, I regard myself as a 'thing,' … then I conceive of myself under the same category as an axe, a head of cabbage, a fountain pen, or a rifle. It is no longer I who acts with 'my' hands, but that 'other person' to whom I have granted this right…"[86] In capitalism, the hand embodies the division of labour, between skilled and unskilled, intellectual and manual. Humans can only think if they have full freedom of movement of their own hands.

For Ilyenkov, thinking is the embodied and social activity of personalities. As Jacques Derrida put it in his 1985 talk *Heidegger's Hand*, though coming from a theoretically different place: "Thinking is not cerebral or disincarnate; the relation to the essence of Being is a certain, I would say, manner, a certain manner of *Dasein* as *Leib*, as body, as living body."[87] According to Derrida, thinking is *hand-work*: "Every motion of the hand in every one of its works carries itself (*trägt sich*) through the element of thinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself (*gebärdet sich*) in that element. All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking."[88] Ilyenkov, too, associates thinking, an embodied perception of forms, with the activity of the hands, echoing Aristotle's *De Anima*:

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[80] Marx, Exzerpte, p. 170.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Aristotle, *De Anima*, p. 32.

[83] Marx, Exzerpte, p. 175.

[84] Ilyenkov, "Ob idolakh i idealakh." p. 313.

[85] Ilyenkov, *Ob idolakh i idealakh*, 438.

[86] Ibid., p. 469.

[87] Jacques Derrida, "Heidegger's Hand," Lecture at Cornell University, September 11, 1985, https://ecommons.cornell.edu/items/74c95389-0c62-45d8-9ebc-867bc9b7bfc4 (Accessed: 29 August 2025).

[88] Ibid.

> If my hand touches an object, then the contour of the hand's movement is exactly the same as the outline of the object: the same form, given once in space, and another time unfolded through movement in time. … And only by relating visual impressions to the forms of movement of our own body (in particular, the hand) along the real contours of external objects do we learn to see in visual impressions the actual contours, rather than merely the effect of objects on the retina of our eyes.[89]

The hand is the most perfect organ for object-oriented activity. Drawing on Spinoza, Ilyenkov insists that thinking does not happen in the brain. Like a jar growing under the hands of a potter, thinking arises from the material interactivity of body, clay, and tools. In Ilyenkov's philosophy of personality, the human hand is unique in its plasticity, capable of transforming and adapting to the objects it holds, touches, and grasps. As Aristotle put it, "the human hand can become a claw, a hoof, a bow, a lance, a sword, indeed, any weapon or tool because it can grasp and hold anything."[90]

For Vygotsky, the organic basis of thinking is not the brain itself but "the plasticity of our neural substance."[91] Plasticity (from Greek *plassein*, to mold) allows matter to change its shape, leaving folds, bends, and traces, for instance the track that a wheel forms on soft earth, bearing "the imprint of the changes made by the wheel and facilitates movement of the wheel along this track in the future."[92] Catherine Malabou emphasises the dual nature of plasticity, as "the capacity to receive form (clay is called 'plastic,' for example) and the capacity to give form (as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery)."[93] Like the brain, hands are both "formable" and formative, capable of creating and annihilating form, engaging in activities of both "sculptural molding and deflagration."[94] Hands and brains are not thinking machines but continuously rework and reshape their morphology.

Plasticity makes the hand a unique organ of dialectical thinking, always reaching beyond the individual body into the world of objects and other bodies. The hand is both I and non-I, uniting two poles, left and right. Unlike a machine, the hand operates according to this dialectical logic, "capable of existing in two mutually exclusive states without breaking apart into two separate organ-blocks, which are in an oppositional relation to each other, but instead remains all the time 'one and the same,' morphologically and spatially."[95] The human hand freely creates its own functions. Anatomically, "the human forelimbs are not at all designed to hold a spoon or a pencil, to fasten buttons, or to play piano keys."[96] And yet, they can take on any kind of work, free from predetermined modes of functioning. Just like personalities arise from social activity, the forelimbs of a newborn develop into human hands as organs of activity.[97] As personalities develop over time, hands are not organs of thinking from birth but become such in the process of their social use. Further, it is not the hand that thinks but the entire process of thought-formation:

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[89] Ilyenkov, *Ob idolakh i idealakh*, 422.

[90] Strätling, *The hand at work*, p. 153. See Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 99.

[91] Lev Vygotsky, *Imagination and creativity in childhood*, in: Barrs, Myra, and John Richmond, eds. The Vygotsky Anthology: A Selection from His Key Writings, Abingdon: Routledge, 2024, p. 117.

[92] Ibid., p. 117f.

[93] Catherine Malabou, *What Should We So with Our Brain?* New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 5.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ilyenkov, *Lichnost'*, p. 405.

[96] Ibid., p. 400.

[97] Ibid.

> Yes, it is not the brain that thinks, but an individual with the aid of the brain – an individual who is entwined in a net of social relations, always mediated by material objects, created by man for man. The brain is but the material, anatomical-physiological organ of this labour, mental labour, that is to say intellectual labour. The product of this special labour is precisely the ideal. And not the material changes within the brain itself. The relationship here is exactly the same as the relationship between a person and his own hand: the hand does not work, but a person works with the aid of the hand. And the product of his labour is not 'found in the hand', not inside it, but in that substance of nature that is worked upon, that is to say, the form of substance outside of the hand, and not as the form of the hand itself with its five fingers.[98]

Like wax or soft earth, hand and soul are plastic; they can perform any movement, retracing and molding different forms and shapes. As Ilyenkov put it in *Dialectical Logic*, the thinking body has the capacity "*to mould its own action actively to the shape of any other body*."[99] Referring to Spinoza, Ilyenkov argues that such plasticity is "the specific feature of that activity that we call 'thinking.'"[100] We actively create forms not according to the shape of the organs of our bodies but freely, just as "the form of a jar growing under the hands of a potter does not form part either of the piece of clay or of the inborn, anatomical, physiological organisation of the body of the individual functioning as potter."[101] Rejoining in one collective thinking body, our hands and minds touch and retrace bodies, things, and their forms. In the thirteenth century, under the spell of left Aristotelians, the Sufi mystic Nasafī wrote that those reaching the absolute acquire all "the eyes, the ears, the tongues and the hands of all the creatures of the world."[102] A personality "sees through all the eyes, listens through all the ears, speaks through all the tongues and gives and takes through all the hands."[103] The ability to see the world as a free human being, Ilyenkov wrote in a similar spirit, "means to see through the eyes of another person, through the eyes of all other people."[104] Only under communism can our hands intertwine, when we see ourselves through the touch of another.

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[98] Ilyenkov, *Dialectics of the Ideal*, p. 40f.

[99] Ilyenkov, *Dialectical Logic*, p. 14. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/works/essays/dialectical-logic.pdf (Accessed: 30 August 2025).

[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid., p. 85.

[102] Nasafī cited in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, edited by Lloyd Ridgeon, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 137.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ilyenkov, *Ob idolakh i idealakh*, p. 100.