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# How ideas connect to the world

## The Spinoza – Ilyenkov solution and causal powers realism

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**Abstract**
The celebrated Russian philosopher, Evald Ilyenkov, draws on Spinoza to solve a key philosophical problem: how exactly does the mind connect to the real world? However, the proposed solution has come under much criticism, for example in a recent special issue of Studies of East European Thought (74, 3). This paper aims to clearly explain the solution, overcoming misunderstandings that are evident in the special issue. The kernel of the solution is an argument that human cognition rests on practical activity. In practical activity humans do not act on a fixed structure within their own bodies, in the manner, say, that the activity of water is determined by its fixed structure, $H_2O$. Instead, human practical activity directly connects with and continually adapts to the structures and causal powers of external bodies. Awareness of practical activity thereby gives the human mind access to a mode of activity that is in direct contact and ever-greater accordance with the objects of the real world. The paper will elaborate and develop this kernel, with particular attention to the notion of 'causal powers' that it contains, by drawing from the revival in philosophy and the social sciences of what has been termed 'causal powers realism'. The paper thereby opens new insights and connections regarding the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution, alleviating the potential for misunderstandings evident in the special issue.

**Keywords** Ilyenkov · Spinoza · Causal powers realism · Philosophy of mind · Scepticism

## Introduction

One does not need to be a philosopher, a social theorist, nor an academic to wonder how exactly our ideas, our theories, our formulas, etc. connect with the real world.

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Philosophy, though, can reasonably be expected to provide an answer to this question. Evald Ilyenkov is a celebrated Russian philosopher who develops an answer by drawing on Spinoza. However, a recent special issue in this journal (see Oittinen 2022a) could give the impression that the answer given by Ilyenkov does not improve on answers given in Western philosophical traditions that draw on Descartes, Hume, and Kant. Contributors to the special issue argue that Ilyenkov does not accurately interpret Spinoza (Bowring 2022; Maidansky 2022), that Ilyenkov's mistaken interpretation fails to solve the problem of how mind and world connect (Maidansky 2022), and that Spinoza's own solution is highly suspect (Oittinen 2022a,b). These critical assessments are now significantly influencing the fast-growing global reception of Ilyenkov's work (for example, Callinicos 2023 approvingly cites Bowring, and Jacobs 2024 approvingly cites Maidansky.) The aim of this paper is to show, *contra* the impression that could be given by the special issue, that Spinoza and Ilyenkov are aligned and, more important, that they offer a basis to solve the problem of how mind connects to world.

The kernel of the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution is an argument that human cognition rests on practical activity. In practical activity humans do not act on a fixed structure within their *own* bodies. Instead, human practical activity directly connects with and continually adapts to the structures and causal powers of *external* bodies. Awareness of practical activity thereby gives the human mind *direct* access to a mode of activity that is in *direct* contact and ever-greater accordance with the objects of the real world. In philosophical terminology, consideration of practical activity provides an argument for 'direct realism' – a direct connection of mind to world. Arguments for direct realism have become popular in contemporary philosophy and cognitive science (Di Paolo and Potapov 2024). What is distinctive about the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution is that it argues for direct access of mind not just to mind-independent *events*, but to the mind-independent *casual powers* and *essential structures* that generate events. In doing so the solution contributes to 'causal powers realism', (e.g., Groff and Morgan 2023) a burgeoning philosophical doctrine hitherto overlooked in Ilyenkov studies – a lacuna that this paper will fill.

The Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution is highly abstract. Ilyenkov's (1977) philosophical masterwork, *Dialectical Logic*, develops the solution fundamentally to incorporate the productive role of human labour and socio-material culture, or so it will be argued below. However, Maidansky (2022) argues that Ilyenkov in fact swiftly *abandons* rather than *develops* the abstract solution. This paper will introduce and draw upon causal powers realism to explain why the abstract Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution is needed and to sketch how it is developed by Ilyenkov. However, it must be acknowledged at the outset that a sketch is not a definitive refutation of Maidansky's critique. To achieve such a definitive refutation in the space of a single paper would no more be possible than to definitively refute a critic of Marx's *Capital* who denies that it is possible to develop from the starting point of the 'commodity' to the many forms of 'capital'. Rather than definitive refutation, the aim is to clarify the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution and its development, by drawing upon causal powers realism, adding a fresh perspective to important previous expositions of the solution (e.g., Surmava 2018, and Surmava and Simakin 2021) and so to further debate on this foundational topic.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section will explain the problem in the context of an introduction to causal powers realism. The following section will ex-

plain the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution. The penultimate section will respond to criticisms to this solution. The final section will summarise and conclude, briefly indicating exciting avenues the solution opens up, such as in the field of artificial intelligence.

## Causal powers realism and the problem of how mind connects to world

### Historical context

Causal powers realism was inherited from Aristotle by Spinoza (Viljanen 2008). After Hume's influential rejection of causal powers realism, the doctrine was shunned by mainstream philosophy for a period of centuries, only to be revived (in diverse new forms) in recent decades (Groff and Greco 2013; Hill, Lagerlund and Psillos 2021; Jacobs 2017). In *radical* Western philosophy, causal powers realism is central to a movement known as 'critical realism'.[1] Initially synthesised by Roy Bhaskar (1975, 1979), critical realism became significant across Marxism and the social sciences from the late 1970s to the present (particularly in the UK and Europe). As regards *mainstream* Western philosophy, causal powers realism remained largely forgotten until the 1990s (an exception being the work of Rom Harré, e.g., Harré and Madden 1975.) It has since become a vibrant mainstream topic, a revival initiated by, amongst others, Brian Ellis, Nancy Cartwright and Stephen Mumford (see Groff and Morgan 2023, and references below).[2] Thus, when Bakhurst (1991) introduced Ilyenkov to a Western audience, causal powers realism was not yet revived in mainstream Western philosophy. A comparison between the newly revived causal powers realism and Ilyenkov's philosophy has not previously been undertaken.[3]

### Elements of causal powers realism[4]

For a simple and intuitive entry point to causal powers realism, consider a drink of water. Water has the power to quench my thirst, amongst many other powers such as boiling at 100 degrees, putting out fires, and so on. Water has these powers regardless

[1] Not to be confused with Roy Wood Sellar's doctrine that is also called 'critical realism'.

[2] There have been parallel developments in the study of the history of philosophy with the rise of the interpretation of Hume as in some sense a 'sceptical realist', specifically a sceptical *causal powers* realist (see Stanford 1998 and Hakkarainen 2012). Also, recent Spinoza scholarship has begun to debate the nature of the connection between Spinoza and causal powers realism, calling for more research on this topic, a call heeded by this paper (Martin 2018; Viljanen 2008; Zylstra 2023).

[3] With the partial exception of my own previous work (Brown 2002 and in Allen et al. 2013) which compares Ilyenkov's philosophy specifically to 'critical realism' but not to causal powers realism more broadly.

[4] The elements I pick out below include 'essentialism' (Koslicki and Raven 2024) and 'emergentism' (O'Connor 2021; Paoletti and Orilia 2017) which are often (but by no means always) included in causal powers realism. As Groff has explained, (e.g., Groff and Morgan 2023) there is subtlety and nuance across the causal powers realism literature that pertains even to its basics. My account in this section is adapted from Harré and Madden's (1975) seminal contribution

of what I think about it and regardless of whether the powers are exercised. Furthermore, science has explained the powers of water by discovering the essential nature or structure of water, $H_2O$, in virtue of which the powers of water are necessarily possessed. According to causal powers realism, this analysis of water and its causal powers can be generalised to many other kinds of thing. For causal powers realism there are many 'natural kinds', each with characteristic and necessary natures and powers, that it is the job of science to uncover, explain and define, just as science has done for water. Spinoza was writing before the advent of modern chemistry, so does not employ the example of $H_2O$, but instead refers to the powers and structures of bodies drawn from the physics of his day, and to the nature and powers of humanity – the human mind being his primary focus in the *Ethics*.

A key element of causal powers realism of strong relevance to Spinoza concerns the identity of different aspects or levels of reality (Bula 2019; Evenden 2012; Knio 2018). According to causal powers realism, it is equally as valid to say (i) 'I quench my thirst through drinking water' as it is to say (ii) '$H_2O$ molecules interact with my metabolic system helping to sustain me'. It is equally valid because when I drink water then $H_2O$ molecules interact with my metabolic system. The same event can be described at two different levels – the level of molecular structure (where the power is *explained*) and the level of everyday human activity (where it is *displayed*.) The second description of the event is not *reducible* to the first nor *vice versa* because the two descriptions respectively give different information about, by revealing different aspects of, the event. When we have explained the powers of water in terms of $H_2O$, we have not somehow dissolved those powers. Water *really* quenches my thirst; $H_2O$ molecules *really* interact with my metabolic system helping to sustain me. If I only know one of the two descriptions my knowledge is impoverished because I only know one aspect of the event, when there are more. Thus, causal powers realism is anti-reductionist. This anti-reductionist principle, respecting the irreducibility of different levels of one single reality, is sometimes called the principle of 'emergence'.

## The problem: sceptical conclusions of a causal analysis of perception

To understand the Spinoza-Ilyenkov account of the problem of how mind connects to the world we can begin early in the *Ethics* (Appendix to Part 1) where Spinoza undertakes a critique of sense experience (what he calls 'imagination'). Spinoza's critique can be understood as a preliminary application of causal powers realism to the nature of the connection between mind and world. Let us return to our simple example of water, this time focusing on the way I perceive the water. What I think I see is the glass of water next to me; I do not think I see the play of light it causes on my retina. Similarly, I think I hear the water boiling in the kettle, not the vibrations in my ear due to sound waves from the kettle. Or, again, I think I smell the lemon from the lemon flavouring of the water, not the excitations in my nose that the lemon flavouring causes. Thus, definite motions that are spatially located in the human body (e.g., vibrations in the ear) are perceived by the mind as qualitatively rich properties of objects that are located outside of the human body (hearing water boiling). The anti-reductionist stance of causal powers realism here applies to the 'experience' of a 'mind', explained by, but not reducible to, spatially definite motion within the human body (the sense organs, in connection with the brain and central nervous system).

The implications of this causal analysis of perception are philosophically troubling. Spinoza (2023, Appendix to Part 1) puts it as follows: when we act on sense experience we are acting on 'confused' and 'chaotic' ideas. In sense experience, ideas of motions within *our* bodies (within the sense organs) masquerade as ideas of the external bodies themselves. We *mistake* ideas of the internal motions within our bodies, with ideas of external things. Yet, the internal motions of our sense organs are the *effects* of external objects on us, which, in general, are entirely different to their *causes*, the structures and powers of external objects. The play of light on my retina caused by my glass of water is entirely different to the essential structure and powers of water. Sense experience never gives us direct awareness of the essential natures of external objects, it reveals only the inner motions of our sense organs.

Spinoza does not press the point in the manner Hume did a century later, but it is easy to see how Spinoza's critique of sense perception leads to scepticism about the external world. According to causal powers realism, what external bodies will do next depends on their essential structures and powers. But the causal analysis of sense perception has concluded that sense perception does not reveal these structures and powers. Therefore, the causal analysis implies that sense experience tells us *nothing* about what external objects will do next. If I only have access to my glass of water via sense experience, then the true nature of my glass of water is unknown to me – so it would be miraculous that when I drink it, then, just like last time, it quenches my thirst. The same is true for *all* external objects. If we act solely on the basis of sense experience, the accordance of our activity with external objects would be impossible to explain except as mere coincidence, a coincidence that could not be counted on in the future. Our unshakeable assurance that the future will resemble the past would, as Hume says, be based upon irrational faith in the indefinite continuation of miraculous coincidence (a faith that Hume (1902, p. 43) termed 'habit').

There have been a number of critiques of the revival of causal powers realism, along the above lines (Backmann 2022; Beebee 2004, 2011; Brown 2002; Mumford 2005;[5] Psillos 2017). It is fair to say that replies by causal powers realists have been slow to emerge, and without consensus.[6] Thus, this line of critique of causal powers realism would seem as effective now as when presented by Spinoza over three centuries ago, and by Hume a century later. Before turning to the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution, a solution that emphasises the role of practical activity, it is instructive to briefly consider alternative philosophical approaches to mind that also highlight practical activity. As discussed by Di Paolo and Potapov (2024), the 'phenomenological' philosophies of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty emphasise practical activity and provide inspiration for work in ('4E') cognitive science that develops key Ilyenkovian insights. However, Di Paolo and Potapov (2024) rightly offer a note of philosophical caution in relating Ilyenkov and phenomenology. Phenomenological accounts of practical activity do not start with an unambiguous commitment to causal powers realism. For example, the Husserlian form of phenomenology is, contrary to

[5]Mumford (2005) argues specifically that any 'essentialist' element of causal powers realism does not overcome Humean scepticism – he therefore does not adopt essentialism within his powers ontology.

[6]Backmann (2022) usefully surveys, and critiques, recent non-Humean responses (most responses defend Armstrong's non-Humean philosophy, not causal powers realism). Mumford and Anjum (2011, Chap. 3) make an interesting defence of causal powers realism, without obvious precedent.

causal powers realism, rooted in a commitment to Kantian transcendental *idealism*. By committing to causal powers realism and overcoming the problem of Humean scepticism to which causal powers realism gives rise, the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution develops a distinctively *materialist* account of practical activity and cognition, unfolded below.[7]

## The Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution

Bakhurst (1991, 2011, pp. 91–122), has argued that Ilyenkov must be considered a 'direct realist'. Within mainstream philosophy, direct realism attempts to overcome scepticism by arguing that we have direct, i.e., immediate, access to things themselves, without going through any perceptual intermediary that lacks direct connection to the world. Direct realism and the debate surrounding it have taken place on the terrain of mainstream Western philosophy, without yet being influenced by causal powers realism. I will use the notion of 'direct realism' in a simple and non-technical sense, to help explain the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution (not with any claim to contribute to the mainstream debate). The solution has two steps: first, to establish that the human mind is *directly* aware of the human body; second, and far more difficult, to establish that *direct* awareness of the human body enables *direct* awareness of the world outside of the human body.

### Step 1: Mind as idea of body

Spinoza's critique of sense experience is, on close scrutiny, also an argument for direct access of the human mind to the human body. It tells us that the human body is so constituted that spatial motions within it are expressed in the human mind as ideas. The flux of sense perception expresses motions within the body, albeit mistaken for objects outside of the body. From the perspective of causal powers realism, the view that ideas could be occurrent to the human mind even when there is no internal human bodily motion would be absurd because powers are explained as the workings (motions) of structures. A *direct* correlate of the flux of my ideas *must* be motion within my body. So, there is an anti-sceptical basis to the causal critique of sense perception in its account of *direct* self-awareness of the human body by the human mind. The human mind is, as Spinoza (2023, Part 2, Prop. 8) puts it, the idea of the human body.

If we are capable of *confused* direct awareness of internal bodily motions, then this holds out the possibility that we are also capable of *non-confused* (adequate) direct awareness of internal bodily motions. However, what about motions *outside* of the human body? Given that the human mind is the idea of the human body then direct awareness of the world outside of the human body can arise in one circumstance

[7] Lassiter and Vukov (2022) set out a manifesto for incorporating causal powers realism within debates on the 'extended mind' (part of '4E' cognition discussed by Di Paolo and Potapov 2024). They do so in a way that, in my view, shows the major potential benefits of building on the materialist philosophical foundations that the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution provides.

and one circumstance only: if, and only if, the *nature of the human body shares commonalities with the nature of external bodies*. So, where in the nature of the human body can essential properties in common with external objects be found? How can any commonality of internal and external structures and motions be verified? And, even if *some* commonalities are affirmed, how can there be internal human bodily structures in common with *all possible* diverse structures of external objects that we may come across? These seemingly intractable questions are addressed in step 2.

**Step 2: Direct access to external objects in practical activity**

Spinoza first addresses the questions developed above in his initial account of how humans achieve adequate knowledge through the faculty of reason: 'Those things, which are common to all, and which are equally in a part and in the whole, cannot be conceived except adequately' (Spinoza 2023, Part 2, Proposition 38). Spinoza clarifies that the commonalities he is referring to include, for example, the property that all bodies are at motion or rest. Spinoza's critique of sense perception does *not* apply to perception of shared properties like motion and rest since mistaking internal bodies for external bodies makes no difference to the ability to perceive the properties shared by both. In terms of our questions above, the human body shares in common with external bodies that it is in motion or rest so the human mind has direct and adequate self-awareness of this abstract property. However, what about the *specific* natures or structures of external objects? Proposition 39 hints at an answer: 'That, which is common to and a property of the human body and such other bodies as are wont to affect the human body, and which is present equally in each part of either, or in the whole, will be represented by an adequate idea in the mind' (Spinoza 2023, Part 2, Proposition 39). Here, then, the human body can acquire specific commonalities with objects that are 'wont' to affect it, or, to draw from alternative translations, with external objects that humans 'usually' (Curley 1985) or 'habitually' (Kisner 2018) interact with. This is potentially a very important advance over Proposition 38 since it offers the possibility of direct and adequate awareness of the specific structures or natures of external bodies, via their being possessed in common with the human body. But what are these specific commonalities exactly, and how are they acquired through practical activity? Spinoza (2023) does not give any specific example. Nor does Spinoza explain exactly what is meant by reference to the 'whole' and the 'part' in this Proposition and in Proposition 38. As a result, the interpretation of these two propositions is an open question in the secondary literature (Hübner 2022). Ilyenkov's (1977, pp. 3–24) interpretation combines dialectics and causal powers realism, as follows.

If we consider sense perception in a static and analytical way, fixed structural part by fixed structural part, then, quite clearly, my specific cognitive and perceptual structures are essentially different from my glass of water and from external objects in general. Instead, we must consider cognition holistically and dynamically. The human mind must be aware not only, and not mainly, of the unique structural differences of the sense organs, the nervous system and so on, vital as these differences are. It must, instead, be aware primarily of the changing spatial relations of these bodily structures and parts, their relative motions. Thus, humans must be directly self-aware of the changing mutual spatial relations of their hands, fingers, legs,

feet, eyes, head, and so on. The ever-expanding repertoire of structural variation, the ever-developing mode of human bodily activity, of the human body's coordinated movement of its various parts taken together, must be tracked by the human cognitive system. Such a perspective reveals a radically different basis for cognition than direct self-awareness of the *fixed* respective structures of the sense organs. Humans have direct self-awareness of a *structure that is not fixed*, of the *varying* motion or trajectory of the human body.

In this light, Spinoza's Propositions 38 and 39 can be understood. The knowledge of the properties of motion and rest common to all bodies (Proposition 38), is knowledge that can be *acted* on. Humans adapt their mode of activity to the external objects they directly encounter. To do so, they must be able to *change their relevant internal bodily structures* in light of reflection on their current and previous activity. Such adaptation enables the human body to act in ever greater accordance with external bodies (Proposition 39.) Awareness of the mode of bodily activity in direct contact and accordance with an external object is reasonably characterised as *direct* knowledge of that object. So, it is not a fixed and isolated structure or part of the human body that shares specific characteristics with external bodies in practical activity. Rather, it is the mode of human bodily activity, the coordinated shape or trajectory of human bodily activity taken as a whole, that comes into direct contact and accordance with specific external bodies enabling their use.

Ilyenkov (1977, p. 21) gives a simple the example of how, in describing a circular object with my hands, the trajectory of my hands takes a form identical to the circular shape of the external object. Ilyenkov's example is perhaps *too* simple, certainly in the eyes of critics, as we will see in the next section, below. So, let us return to our example of a glass of water. My knowledge of the glass of water is coterminous with my ability to use it. I have learnt a range of ways of acting with water: drinking it, boiling it, cleaning with it, using it to put out a fire, etc. Scientists have learnt a range of specific experimental activities with water, revealing its underlying structure, $H_2O$, and explaining its powers. So, we have developed a wide-ranging and unique repertoire of activity with water through *direct* contact and accordance with it, revealing its structural essence and necessary powers. According to the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution, our idea of water consists in our awareness of this *direct* access to, and accordance with, water, it does not consist in awareness of the play of light on the retina to which water happens to momentarily give rise.

It seems to me that all the above elements of Ilyenkov's interpretation are amply present in the development of the text of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Spinoza is very clear that the power of reason of the human mind is coterminous with the power of spatial activity of the human body, including its ability to arrange and use external objects to its own ends (Oittinen 2022a, p. 268; Spinoza 2023, Part 2, Prop. 6). Furthermore, it is a central message of the *Ethics* as a whole that humans have the ability to modify their internal bodily structures to make their external mode of activity better accord with the true nature of the world. As Spinoza puts it '[s]o long as we are not assailed by emotions contrary to our nature, we have the power of arranging and associating the modifications of our body according to the intellectual order', (Spinoza 2023, Part 6, Prop. 10) where the 'intellectual order' is that of true knowledge of the world. Before clarifying and developing the solution further, and tackling misunderstandings, let us consider the huge advance the argument makes on causal powers realism.

## Nature as a whole[8]

The argument thus far reveals an underlying reason why the analysis of mind poses difficulties for causal powers realism. The Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution argues that the essential characteristic of the human body facilitating its mind and its thinking is not a fixed inner structure like $H_2O$ but one which continually *changes*, enabling adaptation to the external world. Continual structural change means that, unlike water, the mind has no *fixed* structural nature or definition. Mind is, in this sense, *essentially non-spatial*. Within contemporary causal powers realism, the key aspects of this difficulty *are* recognised. The self-changing power of humans is recognised (Sayer 2011; Ellis 2013) as is the infinite adaptability of thinking (McGinn 1991; Cooper 2008). As a result, very few causal powers realists argue that the mind (specifically, the faculty of reason) is, or could be, a natural kind (Bhaskar 1979 is an influential exception – see Brown 2002). However, this literature rarely attempts to answer the obvious question to which the non-spatial (in the sense defined) nature of mind gives rise. If mind has no essential structure, then what is its identity or nature, and how is it related to bodies in space?[9]

To explain the power of thought in relation to the motions of bodies in space, we have to take a different strategy than for natural kinds such as water. To explain the latter, science needs to identify the underling structure of water, its structural constitution, and to comprehend how the workings of this structure (the motion of $H_2O$ molecules) interact with those of other objects (such as my metabolic system) to enable characteristic powers (such as quenching my thirst.) Such a strategy does not explain the power of thought. It is no good isolating the microstructural constitution of the human body and brain, like we do with $H_2O$, for that will only tell us, if we are successful in our analysis, that human activity adapts to the external world. It will tell us that humans act, not according to their own internal bodily structures, but to those of external objects. Therefore, to explain thought, we must look beyond the inner structures of the human body and seek to comprehend the relation of human activity to external objects.

Clearly, over time, human activity develops to adapt to more and more external objects and arrangements of objects, without any fixed limit. So, we cannot limit our explanation to a consideration of human activity in relation to any one external object, or finite set of objects. Explanation of the power of thought is therefore a great deal more complex than explanation of the powers of water. It requires comprehension of the relation between human activity and nature as a real, interconnected or unified whole (a whole that Spinoza calls, 'Real Infinite Nature'). Such an explanation can only be achieved in a step-by-step fashion, using a method appropriate to

[8]This subsection draws on Ilyenkov (1977, pp. 16–19)

[9]An exception to the general neglect of this question is Rom Harré and colleagues' research programme on the 'discursive mind' (e.g., Harré and Gillett 1994 – see Kaidesoja 2007). Harré championed the revival of causal powers realism in both mainstream and non-mainstream philosophy (e.g., Harré and Madden 1975). Yet, he subsequently argued that the mind is not a causal power but a social construct of discourse or conversation. Harré's account of mind draws heavily on Vygotsky but mistakenly omits the material and structural constraints on discourse (see Lewis 2001; Pratten 2009, and Porpora 2018). These constraints are by contrast foregrounded by the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution as we will see below.

organic wholes or systems. For Ilyenkov, this is a 'dialectical' method, a method detailed in Ilyenkov (2008), and attributed to Spinoza by Ilyenkov (e.g., Harris 1995, also attributes a dialectical method to Spinoza). Ilyenkov undertakes just such a step-by-step explanation in *Dialectical Logic*, retaining and going beyond the foundation provided by Spinoza, by encompassing Hegel, Marx and Engels. Before considering briefly these subsequent developments, we turn below to criticisms of the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution.

## Overcoming misunderstandings

To clarify and develop the argument, whilst addressing criticisms such as found in the special issue to which I referred in the introduction of this paper, I will focus mainly on Maidansky's important body of criticisms (e.g., 2022, 2017, 2007), which significantly overlap with those of Oittinen (e.g., 2005, 2014). My aim is not a comprehensive reply but the beginning of a dialogue, trying to pick out fruitful lines for further debate, whilst clarifying my own argument. Though a strong advocate of Ilyenkov in general, Maidansky develops a hard-hitting and wide-ranging critique of Ilyenkov's interpretation of Spinoza. Maidansky (2007) polemically presents his critique as an argument that Ilyenkov's interpretation invents a 'pseudo-Spinoza', an inaccurate interpretation of the real Spinoza. This polemical construct succinctly expresses three of Maidansky's key critical themes:

- Ilyenkov's pseudo-Spinoza predicates thought to a 'thinking body', when the true Spinoza predicates thought to mind, not body.
- Pseudo-Spinoza's 'thinking body' fails to distinguish the images of sense experience from the ideas of the intellect. As a result, what pseudo-Spinoza calls 'adequate ideas' are no different to sensual images of a kind that higher animals also possess.
- Pseudo-Spinoza's individualistic 'thinking body' has no material culture whereas Ilyenkov's own developed philosophy stresses the vital importance of material culture, via what Ilyenkov terms 'ideal forms'.

Maidansky (e.g., 2022, p. 339) argues that Ilyenkov corrects his mistaken pseudo-Spinoza at the end of Ilyenkov's chapter on Spinoza, by introducing the concept of 'labour'. For Maidansky, Ilyenkov's correction affirms that pseudo-Spinoza is an aberration that is best forgotten.

Let us take Maidansky's criticisms in turn. It is true that the phrase 'thinking body' is used in Ilyenkov's interpretation of Spinoza whereas, for Spinoza himself, bodies do not think. However, for Spinoza, there *is* a single thing that both thinks and extends. Humans think. Humans extend.[10] Therefore, it is easy to present the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution without the phrase 'thinking body'. The phrase can be replaced either by the term 'human', or by the term 'mind', as best fits the context, to bring Ilyenkov's terminology into line with that of Spinoza (I have followed this strategy in

[10]The unity of human mind and body is a finite manifestation of how, for Spinoza, thought and extension are different expressions of nature as a unified whole.

my exposition of the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution, above). Ilyenkov's use of the phrase 'thinking body' is therefore in itself only a nominal difference between Ilyenkov and Spinoza. Use of the phrase is fully in line with Ilyenkov's stated aim:

> to show the real problem that Spinoza's thought came up against *quite independently of how he himself realised it and in what terms he expressed it for himself and for others* (*i.e. to set the problem out in the language of our century*), and then to trace what were the real principles (*once more independently of Spinoza's own formulation of them*) on which he based the solution of the problem. (Ilyenkov 1977, p. 9, emphasis added)

Why, then, do Maidansky and other critics argue that the difference between Spinoza and Ilyenkov is *not* nominal?

The crux of the issue, made very clear in Maidansky (2022, pp. 336–340), is how Ilyenkov characterises adequate ideas. Ilyenkov does so through an interpretation of Spinoza's account of 'intuitive' knowledge, (the interpretation of which is an open question in the secondary literature on Spinoza – see Hübner 2022) according to which: 'In creating an adequate idea of itself, i.e. of the form of its own movement along the contours of external objects, the thinking body thus also created an adequate idea of the forms and contours of the objects themselves. Because *it was one and the same form, one and the same contour*' (Ilyenkov 1977, p. 19). For me, in this passage, and several passages like it, we see how and why Ilyenkov (1977) shifts the basis of cognition away from the fixed structure of the sense organs towards the varying structure of the coordinated activity of the human body. I explained this radical shift in the basis for cognition in the previous section above. However, critics do not recognise in Ilyenkov's text any such radical shift. Therefore, for Maidansky (2022, pp. 336–340) an idea of a contour can only be a picture arising in sense perception (imagination). By no means could it be an adequate idea of an instance of the enduring causal structure or nature of the thing.

Maidansky's (in my view) misunderstanding of Ilyenkov's text is inadvertently encouraged by how Ilyenkov phrases his subsequent example.[11] Ilyenkov writes:

> When I describe a circle with my hand on a piece of paper (in real space), my body, according to Spinoza, comes into a state fully identical with the form of the circle outside my body, into a state of real *action* in the form of a circle. My body (my hand) really describes a circle, and the awareness of this state (i.e. of the form of my own action in the form of the thing) is also the idea, which is, moreover, 'adequate'. (Ilyenkov 1977, p. 21)

There is a critical ambiguity in this passage. Reference to self-awareness of 'a state of real action' in the form of a circle (or indeed in the form of anything else) could be read as confirming Maidansky's charge that Ilyenkov is referring to a momentary 'state' unrelated to the essential nature and enduring real powers of the thing. A better

[11] This example of a circle comes from Spinoza's *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* (see Oittinen 2005). Ilyenkov considers the example in light of his interpretation of Part 2, Propositions 38–9 of the *Ethics* discussed above. Bowring (2022, p. 310) does not share the latter interpretation, so argues that the quoted passage is 'not in Spinoza' at all. I hope that by developing causal powers realism (in which Bowring, e.g., 2010, and I share common heritage) this paper offers grounds for Bowring to reconsider.

phrase than 'state of real action' appears no less than seventeen times in Ilyenkov's short chapter on Spinoza, but unfortunately not in the quote we are discussing. I refer here to the phrase, 'mode of activity', together with the equivalent (in this context) phrase, 'mode of action'.[12] The phrase avoids the critical ambiguity because a mode of activity (or of action) is *not* a static picture, it is a generative process. Self-awareness of the *mode* of bodily activity in the form of a circle implies knowledge of *how a circle is generated in any suitable given context*. Such self-awareness involves a *concept* or adequate idea – not a picture.

Clarity on the phrase 'mode of activity' can allay Maidansky's concern that Ilyenkov's interpretation of Spinoza fails to distinguish adequate ideas from those of animals. Consider a tethered horse trotting in a circle. The horse is *passive* in respect of the generation of the circle because it occurs via the constraint of the tether outside of the horse's control. Therefore, even though a circle is generated through the constrained action of the tethered horse, the horse has no self-awareness of the *mode* of activity, no awareness of the general definition of a circle, of which its tethered trajectory is but one instance. In general, then, self-awareness of active generation requires knowledge of the relevant *mode* of activity. Without knowledge of this mode, the animal cannot know the essence of what is being generated and cannot *actively* generate it.[13] This is where the unique capacity of humans (or any alike things) lies.[14]

Let us turn to Maidansky's charge of individualism. Maidansky rightly stresses that, according to Ilyenkov's developed philosophy, the world is not just full of powers and activities, but also of material culture. Ilyenkov stresses the importance of what he calls 'ideal forms' to material culture. These include signs, symbols, plans, plays, and so forth, the archetypal example of an ideal form being that of language. According to Ilyenkov's (1977, pp. 74–121) developed philosophy, then, ideal forms and material culture enable concepts to arise. Yet, as Maidansky points out, material culture would appear to be entirely absent from Ilyenkov's account of 'intuitive' knowledge recounted above. This is a reason why Maidansky sees Ilyenkov's discussion of intuitive knowledge as an individualistic aberration on Ilyenkov's part.

Our clarification of the importance of the phrase 'mode of activity' can alleviate Maidansky's concerns. Let us return to the example of a circle and seek to incorporate Ilyenkov's notion of ideal forms. On Ilyenkov's account, the word 'circle' is an ideal form that emerges as the social representation of the concept of a circle. The individual learns the meaning of the word 'circle', hence the concept of a circle, through

[12]The phrase 'mode of activity' is also closely related to the notion of a scheme of future action and, indeed, the word 'scheme' is used often (11 times) with this meaning in Ilyenkov's chapter on Spinoza.

[13]The definition of a circle in this example is what is termed a 'genetic' definition that explains how the shape is constructed, e.g., 'a circle is a figure traced by a line that is fixed at one end' (cf. Oittinen 2005, p. 331). Note that, by fixing the length of the line, then this *general* definition becomes a definition of, and means to generate, a *specific* circle. Thus, the example invokes the relation between general and specific definitions or essences – a focal point of recent Spinoza literature (e.g., Soyarslan 2016) not reflected in Oittinen's (2005) account of Spinoza and Ilyenkov.

[14]Which is not to say that a horse is a mere automaton, with no thought at all, a view that was held by Descartes. It is to say that a horse does not achieve the fully developed conceptual thought of humans. Maidansky (2022, pp. 337–38) seems to unjustly critique Ilyenkov for making the fair point that there is continuity as well as difference between animal and human thinking (Surmava and Simakin 2021 seem to make the opposite, and similarly unjust, critique – see f.n. 15, below). What I think Maidansky is trying to stress is the importance of material culture to *fully developed* thought – as outlined below.

undertaking the requisite mode of activity, i.e., by actively generating particular circles, *under the regulation or facilitation* (*whether through parenting, education, or everyday life*) *of the social norms and practices that are associated with this mode of activity and its linguistic expression* (*its ideal form*). Thus, by incorporating the role of ideal forms in enabling individuals to gain self-awareness of requisite modes of activity, we see that the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution is sociocultural, not individualistic, when that solution is concretely developed.

Why, then, does the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution, and the concept of intuitive knowledge, start at such an abstract level, without explicit reference to material culture? This high level of abstraction enables the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution to articulate how humans are palpably constrained by the objects of nature. The Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution thereby provides a *materialist foundation* for comprehending thought and nature, in fundamental contrast to Hegel's absolute idealism and to Kant's transcendental idealism. Establishing, at the most abstract level, a materialist foundation for philosophy, allows subsequent philosophical development to safely incorporate material culture without abandoning causal powers realist principles, so retaining the integral role of the structures and powers of the real, natural whole. To further understand the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution, subsequent developments thereof, and to locate competing perspectives, we next turn to Ilyenkov's development of the concept of 'labour', through which we can summarise the argument of the paper.

## Summary, development and conclusion

We started with a simple, intuitive, and materialist foundation: what a thing can do (its powers) depends upon what it is (its structure or nature.) This is a principle of causal powers realism. We then found that a preliminary causal analysis of sense perception leads to a philosophical problem: lack of direct access of the human mind to the real powers and structures of the world (a 'veil of perception') leading to Humean scepticism. Turning to the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution, we explained that, in practical activity, humans achieve direct self-awareness of their mode of bodily activity in *direct* contact and accordance with the external object. Such self-awareness is rightly considered direct access to the external object. In response to misunderstandings, such as found in the special issue, we stressed that this is not awareness of a static 'picture' of a momentary state, formed in sense perception, but knowledge of the enduring essential structure of the external object, the structure that explains its characteristic causal powers.

We presented the argument as overcoming established difficulties in the contemporary literature on causal powers realism as regards (i) defining and explaining the mind and (ii) responding to the charge of Humean scepticism. Though not explicit in the narrative thus far, our exposition of the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution has also expressed and overcome the problem of Cartesian dualism (the main philosophical problem with which Spinoza himself was concerned – see Ilyenkov 1977, Chap. 1). We have explained how mind, with no essential spatial definition, relates to, and accords with, the world of bodies in space. We explained that this occurs through the ability of humans to self-change their relevant inner spatial structures, enabling adaptation of their outward mode of bodily activity, to accord with external objects. This

unlimited ability to adapt over time means that thought cannot be explained in relation to any one structure or object, nor to any finite set of structures or objects. Instead, thought must be explained, step-by-step, in terms of the developing relation between human activity and the unlimited diversity of external objects of nature as a whole – a step-by-step explanation that Ilyenkov unfolds in *Dialectical Logic*.

We must still consider the very end of Ilyenkov's chapter on Spinoza, where Ilyenkov argues that Spinoza underplays how *new* structures are *created* by human activity. As Ilyenkov puts it, Spinoza's conception of 'substance', or nature as a whole, is correct up to a point: '[b]ut that, Marx affirmed, is not enough. According to him, only nature of necessity thinks, nature that has achieved the stage of man socially producing his own life, … Labour is the process of changing nature by the action of social man, and is the 'subject' to which thought belongs as 'predicate'' (Ilyenkov 1977, pp. 24–25). Ilyenkov's development from Spinoza's 'substance' to Marx's 'labour' goes hand-in-hand with the introduction of ideal forms and material culture that we discussed at the end of the previous section, above. Maidansky is quite right to highlight this pivotal development. However, the development is not (*contra* Maidansky) a rejection of Ilyenkov's interpretation of Spinoza. The Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution is retained and developed fundamentally in the move from substance to labour. That it is *developed fundamentally* is shown by the overemphasis in Spinoza's philosophy on the mere *adaptation* by human activity to a given whole, underplaying the *creative* and *productive* power of labour. That it is *retained* is shown by the material constraints on labour. Labour does not break the laws of nature, it learns how to use them.[15]

Thus, not only is the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution a materialist philosophical foundation for overcoming Humean scepticism and Cartesian dualism (which afflict mainstream philosophy to this day) it also demonstrates the importance of the dialectical method of ascent from abstract to concrete, championed by Ilyenkov (2008), and I would argue a vital aid to synthesis in scientific work of all kinds (Brown 2008, 2014). The ever-deepening global reach of Ilyenkov's philosophy serves as testimony to this multifaceted importance. Indeed, the need for the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution is becoming ever more urgent. For example, developments in artificial intelligence (AI) continue apace but, if the argument herein is correct, then neither mainstream philosophy, nor mainstream cognitive science, nor phenomenological philosophy, can comprehend the nature and limits of what is termed AI. The Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution, combining causal powers realism and dialectics, offers the requisite materialist basis for doing exactly that (see Ilyenkov forthcoming, and Chukhrov 2020). The comprehension of AI is but one of many exciting paths the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution opens for us to follow. If this paper helps to clarify the philosophical basis for taking any one of these paths it will have served its purpose.

[15] As we have seen, for Maidansky (2022, p. 339) the development is a 'correction' of an 'error' on Ilyenkov's part. For Surmava and Simakin (2021, slide 47), by contrast, the passage stating this development *is* an error, likely inserted by Ilyenkov to appease the censor. In my view, as expressed above, the development is neither a correction of an error nor an error inserted to appease the censor. It is a development from the abstract and simple Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution to a more concrete and complex solution. This is one of my few substantial disagreements with Surmava's interpretation of the Spinoza-Ilyenkov solution.

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