

**E. V. Ilyenkov and V. I. Korovikov 1954**

## **Theses on the Question of the Interconnection of Philosophy and Knowledge of Nature and Society in the Process of their Historical Development**

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In April 1954, Ilyenkov and his friend Valentin Korovikov, junior lecturers at Moscow State University, wrote these “theses on philosophy.” The theses were the subject of discussion at an open meeting of their department. The subsequent furore pitched Ilyenkov and Korovikov against the Soviet philosophical establishment, controlled by philosophers who had come to prominence at the height of Stalinism. Korovikov and Ilyenkov survived only when Khrushchev’s famous speech at the 20th Congress pushed the conflict into the background. The Theses were only discovered by Ilyenkov’s daughter, Elena Illesh, in 2016.

1. To examine the given problem on a historico-philosophical plane is one of the most important forms of research into the interrelation of the philosophy of dialectical materialism and the sciences of nature and society. This question is unarguably topical, and on its resolution depends the further development of philosophy as a science, the direction in which philosophy’s content will be developed.
2. That there is the closest internal interconnection between the development of philosophy and the development of knowledge of nature and society is a fact, and the entire question is to understand the historical forms of this interconnection and their evolution. For the historian of philosophy, it is above all necessary to understand the history of the interrelation between philosophy, on the one hand, and knowledge of natural and socio-historical phenomena, on the other at the level of the evolution of the historical forms of philosophy, in the changing of its subject matter. In other words, it is essential to understand the internal necessity (*zakonomemost’*), the fundamental historical tendency, that has *produced historical change in the subject of philosophy*, and moreover, in the forms of philosophy’s interrelation with knowledge of nature and society, notwithstanding numerous contingencies and digressions, and despite the intentions of particular philosophers.
3. Above all, the question is to understand the social necessity of the emergence of philosophy as a particular form of knowledge, as a particular sphere in the division of intellectual labor. We must understand the nature of

the social needs that can only be satisfied by philosophy and not by other forms of social knowledge – not by religion, art, legal or political ideas.

Therefore, the question is *not only, and not so much*, to research the causes of philosophy's emergence in the same general terms we use for understanding the emergence of ideology, the superstructure as such, as to understand the specific grounds of the historical necessity of its emergence, the grounds on which philosophy emerged and developed as a science, acquiring a specific subject-matter and methods for the solution of its problems.

In science, there are many different points of view on this score. The opinion is familiar that philosophy arises from the need for a general, synthesizing representation of the world as a whole, out of our dissatisfaction with "finite," particular, detailed knowledge.

In its blatant form, this point of view was developed by representatives of positivism in the history of philosophy (see, e.g., Lewes's *History of Philosophy* [probably Liuc, 1892]). This point of view does not withstand scrutiny however, because at the beginning of philosophy's development, the distinction between philosophy and the concrete sciences has no place, it being a product of a much later time. In Ancient Greece, we are confronted by an undifferentiated, unified science.

Philosophy in its origin comes forth immediately as theoretical thought, perfecting itself in the course of understanding the phenomena of nature and society. In this, logical knowledge as a whole stands against religious forms of awareness, the spiritual exploration of phenomena that have immediate significance for social man.

The necessity of the emergence of philosophy coincides totally and completely with the necessity of the emergence of scientific knowledge in general, – in opposition to religious forms of consciousness. In this sense, it becomes completely clear that philosophy at its birth could be nothing other than naïve materialism with elements of just as naïve dialectics.

4. It is characteristic of ancient philosophy to differentiate scientific-theoretical knowledge, which on account of its lack of development, appears as something whole and unified, directly connected to one scientific-philosophical system.

But even in antiquity there is (in Aristotle) the attempt to distinguish the subject of *genuine philosophy*.

5. Thereafter begins the process of the differentiation of the sciences, including the process of the dissociation of philosophy from other branches of knowledge. 'in this movement of knowledge, philosophy acts as *the science of sciences*, and keeps this quality as its characteristic attribute in the system of sciences right up to the emergence of dialectical materialism. Countenancing this specific situation of pre-Marxist philosophy represents one of the central points in undemanding the history of philosophy as a science.

6. What are the causes of the separation of philosophy as "the science of sciences" as a specific domain of research, relatively independent in relation to theoretical knowledge as a whole?

We can answer this question only if we give full consideration to: (a) the undeveloped state of knowledge of the world, the hypothetical and speculative character in many of its parts, and (b) the battle, which begins inside philosophy itself, – the battle that manifests itself above all in the appearance of idealism, as a transformed form of religion, adopting a theoretical form of posing questions and thereby expressing itself as a tension within philosophy.

The whole meaning of the idealist tendency in philosophy consists in the fact that it, in one or other form, in one or other style of argumentation, proceeds from a conception of the inadequacy of scientific-theoretical research into the phenomena of nature and society—from the thesis of science's in principle inability to reach the final, deepest universal and the necessary essence of things. Parasitizing on the historical immaturity and limitedness of knowledge of nature and society, idealism insists on the necessity of *paths to knowledge of truth* that are different in principle from the scientific-theoretical analysis of the phenomena of nature and society, namely religious or speculative-logical conceptions of the "essential," of the "universal."

The necessity of fighting idealism, and also religion (the battle against which is never off the agenda for a single moment in the course of the development of theoretical knowledge of natural and socio-historical phenomena), creates for materialism an issue, which does not coincide entirely with the immediate knowledge of nature and society in the course of their theoretical analysis.

One aspect of this consists above all in the need to *defend* (stand up for) the worldview significance of knowledge, acquired in the course of the theoretical analysis of the phenomena of nature and society, and in the battle against the worldview conception of religion and idealism. This defense of knowledge takes the form of an absolutization, the construction of the essence of the world.

7. As is well known, the battle of materialism and idealism in Ancient Greece gave us the philosophy of Aristotle, whose philosophical system already clearly expresses and crystallizes the tendency to transform philosophy into the science of “primary substance.”

On the one hand, by what *necessity* does the subject of philosophical research since the time of Aristotle become that which carries the name “primary substance” (*sushchnost*), “substance as such” – in distinction from, and even in opposition to, those “substances” that can be directly disclosed in the very phenomena of nature and society by means of their theoretical analysis, and, on the other hand, *what kind of reality* has that object (*predmet*), which is studied in a form mystified by conceptions of “primary substance”?

The answer to such questions can be given only if we understand *the necessity of philosophy* growing out of the very development of scientific-theoretical knowledge.

This necessity absolutely does not consist in the fact that scientific-theoretical knowledge of “finite,” particular phenomena “fails to satisfy the need for .a conception of the world as a whole.” That kind of need can be satisfied completely and with a vengeance by a simple summary of the most important judgements about these phenomena.

The need for a relatively independent, specifically philosophical mode of investigation emerges from the nature of “concrete,” that is, to use a more exact term-theoretical knowledge.

Scientific-theoretical thinking emerges and develops, as Engels showed, together with research into “the nature of its very concepts,” without which it is in general impossible. Scientific-theoretical knowledge presupposes that we carefully address the very forms in which, and by means of which, we reflect the world, the phenomena of nature and society, scientific-theoretically.

*Research into logical categories* – as the form in and by means of which scientific-theoretical knowledge of nature and society perfects itself, taking place in philosophy in parallel with, and on the basis of, the formation and development of those very categories themselves, which occurs always and everywhere in the course of human beings concrete scientific-theoretical knowledge of the world – *acts in the history of philosophy as its objective content as its genuine subject.*

Careful understanding of this circumstance is possible only by philosophical thought, which is reached a very high level *of its development,*

*precisely self-conscious dialectical materialism.* The necessity with which this occurs makes a road for itself spontaneously, and is historically connected precisely with the conception of philosophy as the science of sciences, researching the deepest, most fundamental, definitive, universal and necessary forms of being.

8. Historically, philosophical research into this real subject took the form of directly researching “the deepest and most elemental features and forms of the universe” of directly aspiring to apprehend some kind of *essence of the world* lying supposedly “beyond,” “above” and “below” those substances, knowledge of which is attained or may in principle be attained, in the course of concrete scientific-theoretic research into the phenomena of nature and society.

The understanding of philosophy as the “science of sciences,” as a system of categories, reflecting, its totality, the final, most profound essence of all things and phenomena, as the science of the universal and the infinite in contrast with and addition to “finite knowledge,” is characteristic, as already noted, of all pre-Marxist philosophy, including pre-Marxist materialism.

Nevertheless, of course, even here there exists a profound, principled difference between materialism and idealism. For materialism, it is characteristic to recognize that all the categories that philosophy (or the philosophical sciences) expresses as universal forms of knowledge of real phenomena of nature and society, existing outside and independently of human beings, are given to us in sensation, contemplation and representation, and therefore, and only therefore, are *universal forms of these phenomena themselves*.

Idealism characteristically has the opposite understanding. For it, the categories of philosophy are not universal forms of the cognition of phenomena, given to man in sensation, but forms enabling us to grasp “the infinite, universal essence of the world,” which is not the subject of “finite knowledge.” Let us take a concrete example of such an understanding.

Hegel very clearly gives philosophy this role in relation to concrete (finite) knowledge when he writes:

The Philosophy of Nature takes up the material which physics has prepared for it empirically, at the point to which physics has brought it, and reconstitutes it so that experience is not its final warrant and base. Physics must therefore work to the hands of philosophy, in order that the latter may translate into the Notion the abstract universal transmitted to it, by showing how the universal as an intrinsically necessary whole, proceeds from the Notion. The philosophical way of putting the facts is no mere whim, once in a way to walk on one’s head

for a change, after having walked for a long while on one's legs, or once in a way to see our everyday face bedaubed with paint: no, it is because the method of physics does not satisfy the Notion, that we have to go further. (Hegel, *Phil. Nat.*, Introduction)

Notice, by the way, that one will never completely rid oneself of this [view], so long as one interprets philosophy as the science of the world, of its most general laws.

There can be no doubt of course that in reality both materialism and idealism in their philosophical systems, revealing the essence of the world, expressed nothing other than universal forms of one and the same "finite" knowledge, nothing other than universal forms of the theoretical thought of their epoch, expressed as universal spirit (Hegel), or nature (Holbach).

In reality, both *The System of Nature* and *The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* are in their content identical results of the "generalization" of scientific-theoretical knowledge that had been attained by human beings at the time they were written. In this relation, the difference between Hegel and Holbach consists only in that the former, as an idealist, erroneously draws his conclusions from purely speculative thinking, while the latter consciously generalizes data that are given by science and consciously views *philosophical categories as universal* forms of the world, and therefore – of scientific-theoretical thought.

9. Philosophy was not turned into the science of sciences because philosophers apparently assumed that philosophy builds systems of categories independently of "finite knowledge," and attempted to construct general systems of belief about the world as a whole (worldviews) independently of the development of knowledge of nature and society. This was not attempted even by the idealists, as is shown by the quotation from Hegel. Philosophy was made the science of sciences by the fact that it evolved historically in the form of a system of concepts, reflecting "the world as a whole," the world in its most general relations.

This striving to create a picture or system of the world as a whole presupposes that the totality of positive scientific judgements about the phenomena of nature and society do not give, and in principle cannot give, a unified representation of the world, in all its connections. Therefore, the reflection of the world in the human head was doubled, appearing once in the form of the aggregate of "finite knowledge," and a second time, in the form of one or another philosophical or religious system. We will not discuss the social roots and causes of this phenomenon. They are sufficiently clear, particularly in relation to religion and idealism, which directly insist on the thesis that no

matter how complete the sciences of nature and society become, they never give, and in principle can never give, an exhaustive understanding of the phenomena of nature and society. This is demonstrated most clearly of all, it would seem, by Kant, who limits knowledge in order to clear *space for faith*.

10. It is essential to examine the epistemic causes and grounds of this most important phenomenon in the history of the philosophy of science. Why did materialist philosophy up until Marx share with idealism the understanding of philosophy as the science of sciences, which is able to build such a conception of the world, of nature and society, which the sciences of nature and society cannot get near?

The fundamental cause of this phenomenon, it would seem, resides in the general lowering of the level of theoretical thought about research into nature and society at the emergence of modernity (in the sixteenth century), which is the *other side* of the rapid accumulation of factual, empirical material characteristic of this era, and which has its objective basis in the development of production, beginning its capitalist stage.

There can be no doubt that here the development of scientific judgements on the content on the richness of the facts under examination, is given by what Engels calls “the formal side” of scientific research, meaning theoretical thought at a level able to use already worked-out logical categories. But since “one cannot bring two natural facts into relation with one another, or understand the connection between them, without theoretical thought,” and since the issue consists entirely in “whether one’s thinking is correct or not” (Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, Ch. 10), then, insofar as theoretical thinking continued to develop, it was infinitely lower in its level than thought consciously assimilating to itself the higher exemplars of theoretical thinking developed by the ancient undivided science. Therefore, it was philosophy in the early modern period that was able to find a higher point of view on things, the ability deeper to penetrate theoretically those very same phenomena studied by non-philosophers.

This is exactly why the theoretical understanding of the phenomena of nature and society given in philosophy offers an incomparably higher model of theoretical understanding than the separate sciences, which are unable to cope with the theoretical analysis of facts precisely because too many facts are being discovered every day and must above all be regimented, classified, and subsumed under a fundamental order, and so on and so forth.

*From all this the illusion grows*, reflecting actual historical fact, that philosophy in its nature is called upon to make up for the inadequacy, the deficiency of “finite” knowledge. But this fact, the historically-conditioned and

therefore transitory fact, that the sciences of nature and society were grounded in this period in a spontaneous, empirical, anti-dialectical conception of the aims and means of the methods of theoretical thinking, was perceived by philosophy – and this is absolutely natural in light of the total ahistoricism of the thought of this period – as a fact, expressing not the historically transient state of science, but its eternal, “finite” nature. This reading makes intelligible Marx’s well-known saying about the *importation into philosophy* of the narrow empiricism of the natural science of the seventeenth century, which appears in philosophy as a powerful stream of metaphysical thinking, drowning out the dialectic of the ancients.

This state of the interrelation of philosophy and the science of nature and society continued right up to the emergence of Marxism.

11. The overcoming of the dualism of philosophy and positive knowledge is one of the principal achievements of dialectical materialism.

Before the emergence of Marxism, as we showed above, philosophy spoke the science with a monopoly on the interpretation of the laws of the universe precisely because positive knowledge had not given a constructive understanding of these connections, did not view its subject in its necessary connection with the subject of cognate sciences, did not reveal in its movement, development and, consequently, did not provide an understanding of the world as a materially developing whole. Therefore, for example, alongside empirical history there arose the distinct field of the *philosophy of history*, and so on.

12. Marx and Engels showed that the basic task of natural science, and science as such, studying the socio-historical order confronting them in the nineteenth century, was the task of collecting the totality of the finest results achieved in the 2000-year development of philosophy, which amounted to a paraphrase of the demand to think correctly, grammatically, in the theoretical analysis of phenomena. Marx provides an exemplar of the constructive application of philosophy to particular branches of concrete knowledge, in particular political economy.

And this is the best proof of the proposition that “positive knowledge” is itself able to reach, and is obliged to reach, that very final essence of the object of research, beneath, above and beyond which there is nothing to find for the reason that there is nothing more.

But if that is how things are, then it would be extremely reactionary, from the point of view of the relation of philosophy and science, to place alongside Marx’s political economy a further field, “the philosophy of political economy.”



The latter would be nothing other than an abstract restatement of the first. There cannot be two sciences of exactly the same thing. But this pertains to the interrelations of philosophy and all the particular sciences. Insofar as any science approaches *Capital* in its theoretical literacy and completeness, then it renders unnecessary a special philosophical inquiry into the same subject.

And on the other hand, if some or other science stands at a low level of theoretical literacy, then the task of philosophy is not to make up for its ineptitude by its own means, leaving it as it is and raising next to it a “philosophical understanding” of the object of the given science, but to lead that same science to an appropriate level of theoretical development, to help it understand its object dialectico-materialistically, that is, in connection with development, in its internal, specific, order.

13. But insofar as the sciences arrive at a constructive dialectico-materialist method of thinking, insofar as they nourish themselves on all the achievements of philosophy, they will inevitably be led to an explication of their mutual relations, connections (*perekhodov*), and moreover in their totality to give the only possible picture of the world as a unity in all its interconnections, [in comparison] with which a purely philosophical system of representations of the world as a unified whole would be thoroughly redundant, and the aspiration to create such a thing would be an *antiquated and reactionary* aspiration.

Engels expresses this thought in all his major works. “That which still survives, independently, of all earlier philosophy is the science of thought and its laws - formal logic and dialectics” (Engels, *Soc.: Utopian & Scientific*, Ch 2).

14. The dialectic is not the *monopoly of philosophy*, it is present in any scientific knowledge. Exactly for this reason, the laws of the dialectic are universal, and are studied (disclosed) by any science, whatever its object, and thereby the truth of the object is revealed.

Dialectical laws, in their purity and abstractness, can be studied and clarified by philosophy only as logical categories, as laws of dialectical thought. Only by making theoretical thinking, the process of cognition, its object does philosophy include in itself the study of the most general characteristics of being, and not the reverse, as it is so often maintained.

Philosophy is the science of scientific thinking, its laws and forms; moreover, of course, a materialist science, investigating the forms and laws of thought as an analogy to the corresponding objective universal forms of the development of objective reality.

15. The significance of philosophy for the science of nature and society consists in the fact that philosophy replaces the spontaneity of knowledge with considered, more perfect methods of approaching the object of research, it teaches the well-grounded all-sided use of thought, it arms scientific knowledge with self-consciousness. "One cannot bring two natural facts into relation with one another, or understand the connection existing between them, without theoretical thought. The only question is whether one's thinking is correct or not" (Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, Ch. 10). That is the *question* that *scientific* philosophy must answer, in that resides the meaning and necessity of its existence in the system of the sciences.