CHAPTER 6

Abstract and Concrete Understanding of Activity: ‘Activity’ and ‘Labour’ in Soviet Philosophy

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There is a degree of confusion in Soviet philosophy and psychology regarding the notion of ‘activity’. This confusion was caused mainly by insufficiently considered methodology, when philosophers tried to move from the abstract notion of ‘activity in general’ to specifically human activity. This is impossible to do, however – as impossible as moving from the notion of ‘fruit in general’ to the notion of ‘pear’, because the specific features of this concrete fruit disappear completely in the notion of ‘fruit in general’.

The prominent Soviet psychologist S.L. Rubinshtein came very close to understanding the reasons for the confusion. ‘The notion of activity is used now and then in a very wide and unclear meaning’, he wrote. ‘Like in physiology, where they speak about higher nervous activity, cardiac activity, secretory activity, and so on, in psychology we now discuss psychic activity, identifying activity as deyatelnost’ and as aktivnost’.

It is not entirely clear how the distinction can be made between deyatelnost’ and aktivnost’, which are almost synonymous in Russian but simply the same word in English. There is only one way to outdo the abstract notion of activity – by replacing it with the concrete notion of labour. Rubinshtein did not do this directly and, although he often spoke about labour, he continued to pack this idea into the abstract notion of ‘activity’: ‘Activity, in the strict sense of the word, is an objective activity, it is practice. Activity and action imply impact, changing reality, creating an objectivised product of material or spiritual culture, which enters social circulation.’ However, such activity, which changes reality, is nothing else but labour. In reality, speaking cannot change anything, although it is also deyatelnost’ and aktivnost’.

‘In the process of the historic development of social labour, which led to its division, different types of labour-activity were formed: production, man-

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ufacturing, pedagogical, scientific, artistic, and so on, continued Rubinshtein. This is correct in general, although artistic activity is not usually called labour. Labour is mainly related to the field of material production while artistic creation is related to the field of spiritual production, where man himself is being made. In this context, Karl Marx spoke about emancipation from labour, saying that man would emancipate himself from producing things (it will be done for him by other things), but he will always make himself. In any case, we should start with the notion of labour, because only through labour can we explain the origin of all ideal senses and meanings that may be produced later in all fields of scientific and artistic activity. Evald Ilyenkov played an outstanding role here, showing how the ideal, as such, is produced directly within material activity, that is, in the labour-process. This link was missing in the works of A.N. Leontiev, the well-known psychologist, which is why he supported Ilyenkov so warmly.

Uncertainty regarding such notions as ‘labour’ and ‘activity’ provides the basis for such interpretation, when speaking (or communication) becomes the initial form of human activity. This uncertainty is aggravated by the alienation of labour, as a result of which labour-activity appears to be alien for the individual, uninteresting and unsatisfactory for his human demands, and provides only material living conditions.

‘The primary form of activity’, wrote E.G. Yudin, ‘is labour that is characterised by both its specific forms of social organisation and its direct orientation to achieving a socially significant result.’

‘The primary form of activity’ means that all other forms of human activity should be considered as being derivative of this basic form. It means that, in history, labour has preceded all other forms of human activity. For example, the activity of speaking should be considered as having its historical and logical source in labour. Only a scream is needed to give a signal of danger, but to explain to another person what they should do in a working process, articulate speech is required. We should make a distinction here between symbolising activities and signalling activities: symbols are always conditional, while signals are unconditional. Geese do not arrange for their leader’s scream to indicate danger. But people can organise things so that a red flare means the beginning of an attack. Therefore, speaking cannot arise before labour-activity.

Labour is a form of activity that is concrete but at the same time universal. ‘Universal’ does not mean that it indicates similarity in the features of any acti-