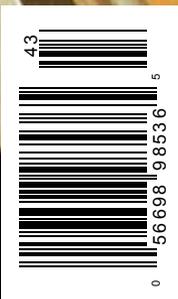


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Soviet philosophy made it all so easy—it told you which side was right. The fundamental question of philosophy was: “Which came first, mind or matter?” and the correct answer was: “Matter.” The history of philosophy was then divided up, to recast an old distinction, into the goats and the sheep, or at least into the evolutionary ancestors of modern goats and sheep, of modern idealists and materialists. The ancient atomists? Not bad, for an era of slavery. The French Enlightenment? Materialist, but still “vulgar” materialist, and not at all dialectical.

But one must not suppose that this easy typology left Soviet philosophers with little else to do, for this would be to leave out the many possible social applications of the basic philosophical truth that matter is prior to mind. The epistemological corollary of matter’s primacy is the victory of empiricism (though not the vulgar kind) over rationalism (which is always vulgar): there is no knowledge prior to experience, there is no self that exists prior to entry into the web of social relations. This means that it is precisely the character of one’s formative social relations that brings the individual person into existence. And this means, in turn, that while Western Marxist philosophers were busy theorizing the state, hegemony, and dodecaphonic music, their Soviet Marxist counterparts had largely retreated into that gentle and somewhat plain sub-discipline known as the “philosophy of education.”

But they were not all avuncular John Deweys or materteral Montessoris. Some were intent on exploring the very frontiers of education, discovering how a proper Soviet citizen could be forged from even the most adverse circumstances. The science of “defectology” grew up in response to the challenge of educating children with physical and cognitive impairments in such a way as to endow them with the fullest range of human experiences possible, and the deepest moral and intellectual characters. Perhaps the greatest challenge for Soviet defectology was posed by the deaf-blind child, for here was a case in which two of the most important senses for apprehending the nature of material reality were blocked.

The Russian compound word for the state of being blind and deaf, *slepoglukhota*, is sometimes



Olga Skorokhodova, 1930s.

lengthened to *slepoglukhonemota*: the state of being blind (*slepōi*), deaf (*glukhoi*), and unable to speak (*nemōi*). It is interesting in this connection to note that the Russian word for a German, *nemets*, derives from the word for “mute”: a German is someone who cannot speak, and thus, presumably, who is not really a person at all. This lexical item may be taken however as an archaism, since Soviet defectologists would maintain that whether one is able to speak, or indeed hear others speak, is not really the crucial question at all in determining personhood. Indeed, for them, the overwhelming focus on language among applied psychologists in the West was a sure sign of their mistaken idealism. To attempt to draw the language out of a deaf-mute child, Soviet defectologists maintained, is to suppose that this language preexists, and such a supposition rests on a deeper supposition, the gravest philosophical error of all: belief in an immaterial, immortal soul.

Setting out from this core conviction, the pioneering Soviet defectologist Ivan A. Sokolyansky (1889–1960) sought to develop a properly materialist pedagogy for deaf-blind children. His most famous student was Olga Skorokhodova (1911–1982). Born



into a peasant family and deprived of her sight and hearing around the age of five after a severe case of meningitis, Skorokhodova would come into the care of Sokolyansky in a Kharkov clinic in 1926. He began to work intensively with her, focusing on exercises of self-observation. In 1947, Skorokhodova would publish her well-known work, *Kak ia vosprinimaiu okruzhaiushchii mir* (How I perceive the surrounding world), which was later republished in several translations and expanded editions.¹ In it, she relates her distant memories of falling into a fever as a young girl and of lapsing out of consciousness; waking up after a great interval, she longed to see a jar of jam on the table and was perplexed at her inability to do so. Beyond the microcosm of her reduced senses, civil war raged.

In 1940, Sokolyansky published a case study based on his work with Skorokhodova.² Following World War II, he published a series of influential texts on dactylology or sign language, on the acquisition of language by means of a “dermatic analyzer,” and on the formation of personality in deaf-blind patients.³ His *Obuchenie i vospitanie slepoglukonemykh* (The education and upbringing of the blind-deaf), which appeared posthumously in 1962, would be republished in several editions until the end of the Soviet period.⁴ For Sokolyansky, the goal of defectology is what he calls the *ochelovechenie*, or “humanization,” of the patient, and the basis of the correct defectological method is the belief that “the path to humanization is not in language and consciousness, but in the construction of real human relations with reality and of communication at this level, which leads to the acquisition of human language and to human consciousness.”⁵ If there is not a specialized “corrective pedagogical intervention,” however, the deaf-blind child “will remain a complete invalid for his whole life.”⁶ The human is not to be discovered within the protohuman mass, but rather must be cultivated or built up by rigorous scientific methods. The men surrounding Helen Keller are denounced as exploitative showmen who

Left: Photographs from Aleksandr Meshcheriakov’s 1974 book *Awakening to Life*, which documented the pedagogical methods used to teach deaf-blind pupils at the Institute for Research into Physical and Mental Handicaps and the home for deaf-blind children in the city of Zagorsk.

sensationally purport to have summoned up the soul of the poor girl, as one might summon a spirit in a séance. The Americans present their work as the spontaneous invocation of a soul, rather than as a difficult labor, as a transformation of matter.

These questions attracted interest not only within the narrower community of defectological scientists in the USSR, but among prominent Soviet intellectuals as well. Thus, as early as 1933, the great proletarian author Maxim Gorky wrote to a young Olga Skorokhodova: "Nature has created you as an object of experiment, so that science might make inroads into one of the criminal and crude mistakes of nature. ... You will serve humanity ... and you may take pride in this."⁷ Science, materialist by definition, was set to raise the matter of Skorokhodova's diminished body into a living demonstration of the transformative power of socialism.

While plant metaphors had been an inspiring source of speculation for the vulgar French materialists in their reflection on the human condition, as in Julien Offray de La Mettrie's *L'homme-plante* (*Man a Plant*) of 1748, for the Soviet defectologists the phytomorphic state was only the unfortunate condition of the deaf-blind child, out of which he or she must be made to develop. Into the 1970s, the image of the human-plant proliferated in philosophical discussions of deaf-blind pedagogy. In his 1974 book, *Slepopglukhonemye deti: razvitie psikhiki v protsesse formirovaniia povedeniia* (*Awakening to Life: On the Education of Deaf-Blind Children in the Soviet Union*), the psychologist and philosopher Aleksandr Meshcheriakov (1923–1974) describes his work in the so-called "Zagorsk Experiment," in which a group of deaf-blind children were brought up between 1963 and 1970 in a home for the blind and deaf.⁸ Meshcheriakov notes that in his early encounters with children in the clinic, they were in a sort of sub-animal state, deprived even of the normal reflexes associated with what Aristotle would have called "the sensitive soul." They were, in Canadian philosopher David Bakhurst's account of the Soviet thinker's description, in a "vegetable condition punctuated only by anarchic discharges of energy."⁹

The same image repeats itself in the work of the prominent late-Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov. The mind of the young deaf-blind patient, writes Ilyenkov in a 1977 essay entitled "Otkuda berëtsia

um?" (Where does the mind come from?), "is not present at all, even in those elementary forms that any higher animal possesses almost from the moment of birth. This is a creature that, as a rule, is immobile and reminds one rather of a plant, of some kind of cactus or ficus, that lives only so long as it is in direct contact with food and water."¹⁰

Ilyenkov killed himself in 1979, evidently by cutting open his carotid artery. Fifteen years later, I arrived in Moscow for a course of language study. At the time, I was wavering between graduate study in Slavic linguistics and a PhD in philosophy. By a series of introductions I cannot recall, I found myself in Ilyenkov's family home, welcomed there by his daughter, Elena. I looked at her father's papers, and, though they were unwavering in their defense of materialism, I felt the presence of ghosts.

I had no interest in defectology, and had never thought about the education of the blind and deaf as a problem for philosophy. But Elena Evaldovna was insistent, and by a further series of introductions I was put in contact with one of her father's brightest students, the deaf-blind psychologist and poet Aleksandr Suvorov.

He had been born in Frunze (now Bishkek), in Soviet Kyrgyzstan, in 1953 and was raised, like Olga Skorokhodova before him, to serve as a model of the attainments of Soviet pedagogy. A proud alumnus of the institution at Zagorsk, Suvorov completed his studies in psychology at Moscow State University in 1977, and since 1999 has worked as a professor in the department of pedagogical anthropology at the University of the Russian Academy of Education.

In January 2014, preparing to return to Russia for the first time in many years, I decided to contact Suvorov. The following month, I spent a day with Sasha in his tiny apartment in the Moscow suburbs. This time, unlike in 1994, it was just the two of us. As I looked around the apartment, I found myself feeling slightly guilty knowing that my looking could go on unchecked by the usual restraint a guest feels in the presence of a host. There were bundles of yellowed papers, covered in Braille and tied together with twine. There were bound books in Braille: a collection of literary excerpts, multiple volumes of analyses of chess strategies, and a single work of classical literature—Aleksandr Griboedov's wonderful 1833 satire *Woe from Wit*.

Sasha's home is outfitted with vibrating apparatuses. He wears a device around his neck that buzzes whenever the doorbell rings, whenever a phone call comes in, or an e-mail arrives. A buzzer attached to the rim of a French press signals the point when the hot water is about to spill over. In his study, several portraits hang on the walls alongside photos of award ceremonies. There is an honorary degree, dated 1991, from Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania. There is a blood-pressure cuff and a pile of medications. He tells me he suffers from diabetes, and has given up writing poetry. The desk in the study is piled with computer equipment, old PCs connected to specialized Braille devices. It is impossible for me to see what is connected to what.

To see. When Sasha goes to find something new, to check if the tea is ready or to pull out an old memento, he says, "Posmotriu," "Let me see." There is no metaphor here, just the onward thrust of daily life. The only way for us to communicate is for me to write out words in Russian, letter by letter, on the palm of his hand. When I make mistakes, I rub his palm as if to erase, and I start over. As is the case in mock-Russian advertising in the West (think, for example, of ЯЕD ДАВN), I find it difficult to make clear the distinction between *A* and *Δ*. When Sasha detects the word I am writing, by a sort of human auto-fill, he says it and I move on to the next. He is able to speak, but since he never hears other people speak, it is very different from "normal" Russian speech, and extremely hard for me to understand.

I trace out an apology for my poor Russian, after so many years of negligence. He says, with remarkable bluntness, "Da, eto chuvstvuetsia," "Yes, it is felt," which seems to me a remarkable play on

words, even though it is really just the standard way of saying, "Yes, I noticed." After an hour or so, we are having a conversation, through letters traced on Sasha's hand, about monads, Newtonian mechanics, and the many virtues of Pasternak's translation of Goethe's *Faust*.

Whether Sasha's preexisting soul was discovered at Zagorsk, or whether his humanity was instead forged there out of resistant matter, is a question that seems entirely irrelevant to the encounter with the individual person. His current state does not seem at all to be the outcome of an experiment, and nor is it easy to imagine his initial state as a criminal mistake of nature, or as in any way cactoid. Sokolyansky and the other defectologists were dedicated and competent in their job, but the metaphysics they presumed to underlie it could have been removed with no real loss.

Metaphysics is irrelevant to the encounter with Sasha, but cannot be held at bay for long in the solitude of the voyage by *elektrichka* back to the center of Moscow. The surrounding world is gray and disconsoling: dirty snow, rusted rails, varicose ankles, and silent faces, a murky crepuscule. O, Russia. So much resistant matter to dominate and transform. So much to not see.

And an internal voice, as if always there, speaks up for the forbidden philosophy, for the goats, for an antidefectology: for the soul that knows the world, even before the pedagogues go to work on the body. None of us is entirely "windowless," of course, as one great rationalist philosopher said the soul must be. The palm of Sasha's hand is a window, but the marvel is that through his hand the entire world can be made to pass, and that there is someone there—yes, already there—to receive it.

1 Ol'ga I. Skorokhodova, *Kak ia vosprinimaiu okruzhaiushchii mir* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Pedagogicheskikh Nauk RSFSR, 1947). All translations mine.

2 Ivan A. Sokolianskii, "Olia Skorokhodova," in *Sotsial'noe Obespechenie*, no. 2 (1940), pp. 3–6. Olia is a diminutive of Olga.

3 See Ivan A. Sokolianskii, "O paltsevoi rechi (daktilologiya)," *Zhizn' i glukonemykh*, no. 2 (1941), pp. 11–13; "O vospriiatii ustnoi pomoshchi kozhnogo analizatora," in *Ostatochnyi slukh u tugoukhikh i glukonemykh detei* (Moscow:

Izdatel'stvo Akademii Pedagogicheskikh Nauk RSFSR, 1957), pp. 130–137; and "Formirovanie lichnosti pri otsutstvii zritel'nykh i slukhovykh vospriiatii," in *Obshchee sobranie Akademii nauk SSSR, posviashchennoe tridtsatiletiiu Velikoï Oktiabrskoi sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk, 1948), pp. 367–376, respectively.

4 Ivan A. Sokolianskii, *Obuchenie i vospitanie slepoglukonemykh* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Pedagogicheskikh Nauk RSFSR, 1962).

5 Ivan A. Sokolianskii, preface to Ol'ga I. Skorokhodova, *Kak ia vosprinimaiu*, p. 2.

6 Ibid.

7 Letter to Skorokhodova, 3 January 1933, in A. Maksim Gor'kii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 30 (Moscow: Nauka, 1968), p. 273.

8 Aleksandr I. Meshcheriakov, *Slepoglukhonemye deti: razvitie psikhiki v protsesse formirovaniia povedeniia* (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1974). The translation of the title for the 1979 English edition, brought out by Moscow-based Progress Publishers, does not follow the original Russian, which

is better rendered as "Blind-Deaf Children: The Development of the Psyche and the Process of Formation of Behavior." Zagorsk is known today by its original name, Sergiyev Posad.

9 David Bakhurst, *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy: From the Bolsheviks to Evald Ilyenkov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 223.

10 Eval'd V. Il'enkov, "Otkuda beretsia um?", in *Uchites' myslit' smolodu: Dva ocherka iz izdaniia* (Moscow: Znanie, 1977), p. 1.