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Toward a Definition of the Matter in Philosophy

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Toward a Definition of the Matter in Philosophy

Alexey V. Antonov

Abstract- The definition of the matter, which is still in use today, is based on the method of formation of general notions, proposed in his time by John Locke. In doing so, the matter is regarded not as something sensually existing, but as a distraction from the distinctions of forms of matter already known to us. This gave George Berkeley grounds for arguing that such an abstraction could simply be discarded without anyone even noticing it. In his work "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism", objecting to G. Berkeley, Lenin corrected the definition of the matter by emphasizing that it is not just a philosophical category to denote objective reality, but that the matter is "copied, photographed, displayed by our senses, existing independently of them." In this way, however, V.I. Lenin only confirmed G. Berkeley's view that "to exist is to be perceived", which he himself had previously challenged.

In the opinion of the author of the article, V. I. Lenin's definition of the matter did not fully take into account the lessons of Hegelian dialectics, which proves that the most general concepts are those that appear first. It turns out that at this point the matter should be understood not as some abstraction from forms already known to us, but as some of its pre-physical form, whatever it may be. But the pre-physical the form of the matter is not given to us in the senses. Yet its objective existence is undeniable. After all, if we reject the pre-physical form of the matter, as G. Berkeley ironically suggested, we will destroy with it the physical basis of the world including ourselves.

However, such an understanding of "the matter" raises the question of the beginning of its development in a new way.

Keywords: metaphysics, matter, ideal, being, nothingness.

I. Formation of General Concepts in Philosophy

Aristotle was the first to consider general concepts in philosophy. In the work "The Categories" he identified ten such concepts, each of which «...signifies either substance or quantity or qualification or a relative or where or when or being-in-a-position or having or doing or being-affected».» (Aristotle, 1995a, p. 27) And since the first entities, such as, for example, "table", "man" and the like were numerous, Aristotle used the category of "being itself" (Aristotle, 1995b, p. 3571) as a common concept for them. And this being itself was already understood in antiquity as both an ideal and a material beginning. However, before John Locke, the mechanism of the formation of general concepts was not considered neither by Aristotle, nor by anyone after him.

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J. Locke is not usually mentioned among the great logical philosophers. But according to his contemporary colleague Kenneth Winkler: «Like most philosophers who taxonomize the sciences, Locke fails to say where his own book falls, but the subjects of Book III ('Of Words'), Book II ('Of Ideas'), and Book I ('Of Innate Notions') indicate that a great deal of it belongs to logic» (Winkler, 1989, p. 1). It was J. Locke who showed the world how general concepts are formed. According to Locke, «...wherein does his idea of man differ from that of Peter and Paul, or his idea of horse from that of Bucephalus, but in the leaving out something that is peculiar to each individual, and retaining so much of those particular complex ideas of several particular existences as they are found to agree in?» (Locke, 1999, p. 397)

Thus, J. Locke concludes that the general ideas «...are the workmanship of the understanding, but have their foundation in the similitude of things...» (Locke, 1999, p. 400) While being mental constructions, they do not reflect something that really exists. Their true reality is a thought. J. Locke also believed that, having identified the mechanism by which general concepts are formed, he finally brought clarity to the dispute about what "the matter" is. After all, «...the taking matter to be the name of something really existing <…> has no doubt produced those obscure and unintelligible discourses and disputes, which have filled the heads and books of philosophers concerning materia prima...» (Locke, 1999, p. 488)

However, J. Locke did not take into account one circumstance: whether the matter as a construction of reason can be a substance, i. e. to be the cause of itself? Of course, no. That is why, George Berkeley wrote: «That the things I see with my eyes and touch with my hands do exist, really exist, I make not the least question. The only thing whose existence we deny is that which *philosophers* (emphasis by G. Berkeley — A.A.) call Matter or corporeal substance. And in doing of this there is no damage done to the rest of mankind, who, I dare say, will never miss it» (Berkeley, 1901, p. 371). It is clear that speaking about "philosophers" G. Berkeley meant first of all exactly J. Locke, whose main work he criticized. At the same time, G. Berkeley is not talking about ontological, but only about the logical "absence" of the matter. From his point of view, "the matter" is only a erroneously formed concept having no correspondence to the nature. As G. Berkeley writes: «...You may, if so it shall seem good, use the word matter in the same sense as other men use nothing, and

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so make those terms convertible in your style» (Berkeley, 1901, p. 400).

And the "absence" of the matter was not noticed by those who should have noticed it in the first place, i. e. the materialists themselves. For example, here is Friedrich Engels's definition of the matter in his "Dialectics of Nature": «Matter as such is a pure creation of thought and an abstraction. We leave out of account the qualitative differences of things in lumping them together as corporeally existing things under the concept matter. Hence matter as such, as distinct from definite existing kinds of matter, is not anything sensuously existing» (Engels, 2010, p. 533). After such statements, it is not clear how ".... Engels himself managed to formulate "die Grundfrage der Philosophie" (the so-called "basic question of philosophy" about the relation between the matter and consciousness — A.A.) while inquiring if abstraction can really be primary in relation to consciousness?" (Smorodinov, 2009, p. 19)

As we see, criticizing the Lockean concept of "the matter", G. Berkeley inadvertently touched the philosophical position of Marxism. However, we would in vain reproach V.I. Lenin that in his work "Materialism and Empirio-criticism" he did not take into account this criticism. After all, "Dialectics of Nature" was published in Russian in 1925 already after the death of V.I. Lenin. That is why, V.I. Lenin had to solve himself the question of the logical definition of the matter.

II. The Logical Definition of the Matter as the Main Question in the Discussion between V. I. Lenin and Empiriocritics

V. I. Lenin defined the matter in the following way: «What is meant by giving a “definition”? It means essentially to bring a given concept within a more comprehensive concept. For example, when I give the definition “an ass is an animal”, I am bringing the concept “ass” within a more comprehensive concept. The question then is, are there more comprehensive concepts with which the theory of knowledge could operate than those of being and thinking, matter and sensation, physical and mental? No» (Lenin, 2010, p. 146).

The soviet philosophers took this idea for granted. But is the consciousness really the same ultimate category as the matter? Is the psychology, for example, less ideal than the consciousness? After all, they are different forms of reflection. And the "ideal" category is common for both of them and therefore, it is indeed the ultimate category. Thus, it should oppose the matter within the framework of the "basic question of philosophy". In fact, all philosophers do so when they have to distinguish between materialism and idealism.

Now only few people remember what reason forced V.I. Lenin polemize with empiriocritics. And it consisted in combining two points of view on the matter that existed in Marxist philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century.

For K. Marx and F. Engels, there existed only material things, and the so-called "the matter" or "thing-in-itself" was nothing more than a collective name for them. The empiriocritic V.M. Chernov described the matter in the same way: "... the 'thing-in-itself' is not a special reality among the other realities - it is nothing more than a limiting concept serving to round out our worldview. The justification for a philosopher operating with this concept is exactly the same as for a mathematician operating with irrational quantities, as for a geometer operating with 'infinity' as a finite quantity." (Chernov, 1907, p. 43) In short, in this point the positions of Marxists and empiriocritics did not differ from each other. The only difference was that while identifying science with philosophy, the empiriocritics considered the notion of "the matter" to be supefluous. Whereas Marxists pointed out to them that science is also filled with "empty" and not found in nature useful abstractions, such as "absolutely black body".

At the same time, Marxism had another point of view on the matter, that of G.V. Plekhanov and L.I. Axelrod (Orthodox), which was in fact a "hieroglyphic" version of Kantianism, as many philosophers in the early twentieth century have considered. And the reason for such judgments was given by G. V. Plekhanov himself, according to whom, "In contrast to "the spirit" we call "the matter" such a phenomenon which acts on our sense organs and causes our sensations. What does exactly act on our senses? I answer this question together with Kant: things-in-itself. It follows that the matter is nothing but a collection of things-in-itself, since these things are the source of our sensations." (Plekhanov, 1956, p. 446)

However, Kantian "things-in-itself" are not real things given to us in sensations, but intelligible entities. This is why the position of G.V. Plekhanov caused such a violent rejection within Marxism. The conclusion that "it is possible to oppose Plekhanov's 'materialism' to mysticism only by misunderstanding" (Bazarov, 1910a, p. 14) was shared by many philosophers at that time. And the logic of consistent materialism forced Marxists to be more sympathetic to E. Mach and R. Avenarius with their reliance on real facts than to the "patented" materialist G. V. Plekhanov.

In the book "Materialism and Empirio-criticism" V. I. Lenin tried to reconcile these two lines of philosophical Marxism. But did he really manage to do it? In any case, in their responses to Lenin's criticism, his opponents noted that V. I. Lenin could not cope with his task. V. A. Bazarov noted that "... putting forward against his opponents, often imaginary ones, either a transcendent or realistic understanding of the matter, the author helplessly wanders between these two pines for 400 pages of his exorbitantly swollen pamphlet." (Bazarov, 1910b, p. XXII)

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A. A. Bogdanov, on the other hand, found in V. I. Lenin's works not only a "transcendental" and "realistic", but also a third understanding of the matter. "For Plekhanov, things-in-itself have by no means a sensual character, which is peculiar only to their "phenomena", and therefore differ fundamentally from these latter. For Ilyin (the pseudonym under which V.I. Lenin published the work "Materialism and Empirio-criticism" - A.A.), as he repeatedly emphasizes, "there is no other being but the sensual", and things-in-itself are fundamentally homogeneous with phenomena; this is not a metaphysical, as by Plekhanov, but an empirical theory of reflections. It is clear that it does not agree with both of Ilyin's views on the "thing-in-itself", which we noted previously, that we face now a third conception" (Bogdanov, 2010, p. 170).

For A.A. Bogdanov himself, this is nothing more than eclecticism and confusion, since we cannot have any concepts about the "thing-in-itself", with which G. V. Plekhanov agrees, much less a priori attribute empirical existence to them. However, like I. Kant, V. I. Lenin always wrote about the things he assumed to be in reality, not caring at all whether it corresponded to generally accepted theories. His idea of the empirical character of "things-in-itself" actually developed the materialist potencies of I. Kant.

The point is that Marxism, which had dialectics as its source, regarded development as Hegelian "aufheben," that is negation with the retention of everything positive. For this reason, G. W. F. Hegel, for example, appeared in Marxism as the summit of all idealist philosophy, L. Feuerbach as the summit of all materialist philosophy, and K. Marx himself, according to this logic, represented the summit of the summits of all previous philosophy. In this case, I. Kant involuntarily turned into an under-Hegel, while outstanding and small philosophers of the past, in their turn, became under-Marxes. And it was so not only in Soviet philosophy. It is easy to see that even Marxists of the early twentieth century considered the philosophy of I. Kant from the point of view of Hegel.

For G. W. F. Hegel, «the so called thing-in-itself» is «...the thought product of pure abstraction» (Hegel, 2010, p. 16). And here already the realist F. Engels regards the thing-in-itself as an abstraction. Empiriocritic V. M. Chernov also considers the thing-in-itself to be a product of logical generalizations: "This is the remainder of a sequential infinite subtraction, it is something like a mathematical point that has no dimensions and remains of a real "thing" after everything is sequentially taken away from it... except the name, except the bare name, sound, empty, meaningless, having only a negative, "limit" value" (Chernov, 1907, p. 43-44). A. A. Bogdanov considered the "thing-in-itself" exactly in the Hegelian way: "When the concept of "thing-in-itself" was brought by Kant to the highest degree of philosophical purity, then the collapse of this concept became inevitable because its logical emptiness and, with its real meaninglessness could no longer hide from the knife of criticism behind the sheath of formal obscurity. It turned out that this concept expresses nothing but reality plucked to such an extent that nothing remained of it. While using this concept there is nothing to think about. This is its main drawback..." (Bogdanov, 2003, p. 108).

In this form, it was dialectically reflected only by G. V. F. Hegel. I. Kant himself defined the thing-in-itself not as a concept, but as a "noumenon". And this is not the same thing. As Kant writes, «If by a noumenon we understand a thing insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition, because we abstract from the manner of our intuition of it, then this is a noumenon in the negative sense. But if we understand by that an object of a non-sensible intuition, then we assume a special kind of intuition, namely intellectual intuition, which, however, is not our own, and the possibility of which we cannot understand, and this would be the noumenon in a positive sense» (Kant, 1998, p. 360-361).

This vaguely formulated though profound thought of I. Kant can be expressed much more simply: if we had an opportunity to contemplate the noumenon intellectually, we would be convinced that it exists in reality. Of course, the author of the "Critique of the Power of Judgment" understood that even if we had the possibility of intellectual contemplation, we would not be able to see "the beautiful as such", but only beautiful things. But we would be able to observe the "aesthetic ideal" directly, since, for all its abstractness, it is a "beautiful man" with all his empirical features. Needless to add that things-in-itself as noumens were thought by I. Kant according to the scheme of "aesthetic ideal", but not of the "beautiful". That is why, in his polemic with J. Fichte I. Kant asserted their real existence, but not their mere presence in the consciousness of the contemplating "I".

I. Kant wrote that he introduced noumens in order to limit sensuality, because «...for one cannot assert of sensibility that it is the only possible kind of intuition» (Kant, 1998, p. 362). However, we see that first of all Kant should have distinguished noumens "as a possible mode of contemplation" from the abstract-logical reading of them.

The Lenin's merit lies in the fact that he explicitly returned the "things-in-itself" to their empirical character implicit by Kant, and thus raised materialism to a higher level than the "realists" K. Marx and F. Engels. However, his materialistically "corrected" "transcendental" Plekhanov's point of view on the matter remained in contradiction with the Marxist "realist" approach to it. After all, F. Engels' concept of "the matter" is formed precisely with the help of abstract-logical generalizations. That is why, we have to admit that, contrary to the glorification of the Soviet era, it was not possible to combine two Marxist points of view on

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the matter in V. I. Lenin's book "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism".

III. Philosophical Matter Considered as its Pre-Physical Form

But this was not the main drawback of Lenin's definition of the matter. In spite of the fact that Lenin knew well the works of G.W.F. Hegel and highly appreciated them, nevertheless, he did not take into account all the lessons of Hegelian dialectics. After all, from the point of view of G.V.F. Hegel, the more general concepts are those that are born first. And if we consider the matter as a substance, i. e. literally as "something lying below everything", then the "first matter" or "thing-in-itself" should be not some abstraction from the forms of the matter already known to us, but a historically preceding form. And since today the limit of scientific cognition of the matter is its physical form, we must consider philosophical matter as its pre-physical form, whatever it may be. At the same time, the very idea of the existence of a pre-physical form of the matter is not something new in philosophy. F. Engels also wrote about the infinity of forms of the matter. For example, V. V. Orlov called it "subphysical level of the matter", (Orlov, 2010, p. 38) and A. P. Fedjaev defined it as "extraphysical reality" (Fedjaev, 2014).

However, today science does not know any pre-physical form of the matter. And therefore, it is also possible to speak about it only as about a kind of abstraction. In this case, in what way this abstraction of the "pre-physical" form of the matter is better than the one proposed by F. Engels? It is very easy to check it. If G. Berkeley ironized about abstract-logical matter that it can be simply thrown away and no one will even notice it, but it will not be possible to do so with the pre-physical form of the matter. After all, by destroying it, we will destroy the physical basis of the world, including ourselves.

But if dialectics requires to recognize as "the matter" its pre-physical form, which is not yet known to us, then what characteristics of this "the matter" will remain? Only one characteristic is "to be an objective reality". Can we agree with such a hypothesis? If the matter is not given to us in sensations, how can we even know whether it exists or not? Won't we just have to believe that the matter exists?

It is not surprising that V.I. Lenin hesitates in defining what the matter is. On the one hand, "...the *sole* "property" of matter with whose recognition philosophical materialism is bound up is the property of *being an objective reality...*" (emphasis by V.I. Lenin — A.A.) (Lenin, 2010, p. 260-261). On the other hand, in order to avoid fideism it is necessary to introduce sensations into the definition. As a result, Lenin's definition is known to everyone: "...matter is that which, acting upon our sense-organs, produces sensation; matter is the objective reality given to us in sensation, and so forth" (Lenin, 2010, p. 146). At the same time, V.I. Lenin does not even notice that such a definition of matter actually reconciles him with the formula of G. Berkeley: "...to exist means to be perceived", which he hotly disputed.

IV. The Obvious Conclusion

But if the noumenon of the "pre-physical" form of the matter is not given to us in sensations, why on earth do we endow it with the status of existence? It seems that there are no grounds for this. Meanwhile, the objectivity of the existence of anything is not necessarily proved by the fact that it must necessarily be given to us in sensations. In particular, the English philosopher Roy Bhaskar, who initiated the so-called ontological turn in philosophy at the end of the twentieth century, gave no less importance to the principle of causality. R. Bhaskar concluded that «...science employs two criteria for the ascription of reality to a posited object: a perceptual criterion and a causal one. The causal criterion turns on the capacity of the entity whose existence is in doubt to bring about changes in material things. Notice that a magnetic or gravitational field satisfies this criterion, but not a criterion of perceivability. On this criterion, to be is not to be perceived, but rather (in the last instance) just to be able to do» (Bhaskar, 2005, p. 13). In other words, if the invisible causally affects us - be it a magnetic field or gravity - its reality is proved by their action. After all, falling upward has never yet succeeded for anyone.

But this means that in philosophy the definition of the matter does not need the criterion of sensation at all. "*The matter is simply objective reality*", without any admixture of sensations into the definition. It is naive to believe that the galaxies discerned by the Hubble's telescope, for example, began to exist only at the moment of their discovery. The attempt to squeeze the matter into the forms that are given to us in sensations is not adequate to reality itself. If philosophy as a form of thinking does not go beyond sensations to become literally meta-physics, it will simply be unnecessary. That is why at a new stage of development of cognition we should definitely say: "*Metaphysics, beware of physics!*"

Even now the pre-physical form of the matter reveals itself in the anomalies of its physical form, just as once in the phenomena of "chemical affinity" the action of physical atoms not yet discovered at that time was manifested. In particular, with the help of the Wilson camera, everyone can see how from vacuum, i. e. from "nothingness" from the physical (but not material!) point of view, charged particle pairs suddenly fly out. And night vision devices give us a vivid example of how yesterday's noumens today become ordinary things.

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