Social and Physical Form: Ilyenkov on the Ideal and Marx on the Value-Form

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E.V. Ilyenkov's philosophy represents an extraordinarily ambitious attempt to use the idea that human social activity has determinate 'forms' to achieve three different goals: an account of the categories of thought, an account of our knowledge of the natural world, and an account of human consciousness.[1] Overarching these goals, and incorporating them, is another: that of giving an account of mind based on social activity.

Ilyenkov's conception of the ideal, or of ideality, plays a central role in this project. We could go as far as to say that for Ilyenkov 'ideality' is the most fundamental feature of human mindedness. By demonstrating that ideality is an objective yet non-physical feature of social activities, and of the things used and produced by social activities, Ilyenkov aims to show that an elementary human mindedness inheres in these activities and things, which makes possible the fully-fledged human mindedness that characterises individual reflective human beings.

Understanding Ilyenkov's account of mind, therefore, depends on gaining a clear grasp of his conception of the ideal. Yet, notoriously, that conception has proved an elusive one to pin down. In this article, I shall attempt to elucidate some aspects of Ilyenkov's conception of the ideal by taking as a cue his statement, in his article 'The Problem of the Ideal', that 'the ideality of the value-form is an extremely typical and characteristic case of ideality in general' (DI 207, CI 90-91).[2] This suggests that Ilyenkov develops his account of the ideality of human activities and the things involved in those activities by generalising from Marx's account of the value-form of commodities.[3] And in fact in this article, which is his fullest exposition of the concept of the ideal, Ilyenkov – after attacking his opponents and commenting on the notion of the ideal in Plato, Kant and Hegel – presents his own

[1] I am grateful to Chris Arthur and Joseph McCarney for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

[2] The article originally appeared in 1979 as 'Problema ideal'nogi' (The Problem of the Ideal), and was reprinted in 1991 as 'Dialektika ideal'nogo' (The Dialectic of the Ideal). I have used the German translation by G. Richter of the latter as 'Dialektik des Ideellen' (Ilyenkov 1994, referred to here as DI). In translating Richter's German into English I have been closely guided by the partial English translation of the article by R. Daglish as 'The Concept of the Ideal', which was published before the full article appeared in Russian (Ilyenkov 1977a, referred to here as CI).

[3] Of course this is not to deny the influence of other antecedents, most obviously of Hegel's account of 'objective spirit', in the formation of Ilyenkov's concept of the ideal.

account of the ideal precisely through a discussion of Marx's account of the value-form. My procedure here will be to comment in detail on this presentation, adopting the working assumption that in it Ilyenkov is in fact generalising from Marx's value-form to arrive at his concept of the ideal. This will lead to some conclusions about the nature of Ilyenkov's generalisation from Marx, and about the conception of the ideal that results from it.

1. The varieties of the value-form

Ilyenkov begins his discussion as follows:

> In his analysis of money – that familiar yet mysterious category of social phenomena – Marx formulated the following definition: 'price or the money-form of commodities is, like their value-form in general, a form distinct from their palpable real bodily form, therefore only an ideal or represented form'. Here Marx describes as 'ideal' nothing more or less than the value-form of the products of labour in general. (DI 198-9, cf. CI 85)[4]

What exactly is the 'value-form' of a product, which Marx contrasts here (and elsewhere) to its bodily form? Ilyenkov proceeds to a brief summary:

> According to Marx, the ideality of the form of value consists not, of course, in the fact that this form represents a mental phenomenon existing only in the brain of the commodity-owner or theoretician, but in the fact that, here as in many other cases, the corporeal palpable form of the thing (for example, a coat) is only a form of expression of a quite different 'thing' (linen, as a value) with which it has nothing in common. The value of the linen is represented, expressed, 'embodied' in the form of the coat, and the form of the coat is the 'ideal or represented form' of the value of the linen. (DI 199, CI 85)

[4] The Marx quotation is from *Capital* Volume 1 (MEW 23:110, Marx 1976a:189). Unless otherwise mentioned, passages from *Capital* are from the fourth edition, on which MEW 23 and Marx 1976a are based. However in the passages cited in this article there are no significant differences between the second, third and fourth editions (what I call the 'later editions'). In the present instance Ilyenkov quotes from Marx in the original German, but where he quotes in Russian Richter reproduces Marx's original German text. In translating Marx's German into English for this article I have used the standard translations listed in the bibliography as guides.

Ilyenkov is referring to Marx's exposition of the form of value in chapter 1 of *Capital*, in which he examines the ways in which the values of commodities are expressed, that is, the ways in which a commodity can be worth something or other. If one commodity is worth a certain amount of another commodity or commodities then the commodities stand in what Marx calls a 'value relation', in which the value of the first is expressed in terms of a quantity of the other(s). The sentence that describes this relation is called a 'value expression'.[5] Marx begins his exposition with the simplest kind of value relation, in which the value of one commodity is expressed in terms of a certain amount of one other commodity: for example the relation of 20 yards of linen being worth one coat. Here the coat plays what he calls the role of the 'equivalent', that is, the commodity in terms of which the value of the linen is expressed. Ilyenkov quotes from a paragraph in the later editions of *Capital* which contains the heart of Marx's analysis of this simple value relation:

> Hence in the value relation, in which the coat is the equivalent of the linen, the coat-form counts as value-form [i.e. as the form of value – AC]. The value of the commodity linen is therefore expressed in the body of the commodity coat, the value of one commodity in the use-value of another. As use-value the linen is something sensibly different from the coat; as value it is the same as the coat, and therefore looks like the coat. Thus it acquires a value-form different from its natural-form. Its value-being appears in its sameness with the coat, just as the sheep-like nature of the Christian does in his sameness with the Lamb of God. (MEW 23:66, Marx 1976a:143)[6]

This paragraph of Marx's deserves close examination, an examination which I shall use as a starting point for a brief exposition of his account of the value-form as a whole. The linen is a use-value, that is, an object useful for satisfying human wants or needs. As such it is a physical object and has characteristics which are quite distinct from those of the coat.[7] But if the linen is conceived simply

[5] It is important to see that the value relation itself involves an 'expression', albeit of a non-linguistic kind, of a commodity's value. This 'expression' is itself expressed linguistically when that relation is described in a value expression. This may explain why Marx does not distinguish as clearly as I have here between a value relation and the value expression that describes it.

[6] Ilyenkov quotes only the last three sentences of the paragraph, beginning 'As use-value ...' (DI 199, CI 85). I have reproduced the whole paragraph so as to make Marx's sense clearer and to serve as a basis for the following discussion.

[7] Marx typically identifies the commodity's status as a use-value with its status as a physical object: for him the 'existence of the commodity as a use-value coincides with its natural palpable existence' (MEW 13:15, Marx 1970:27).

from the point of view of its value, i.e. of what it is worth, rather than from the point of view of its usefulness for satisfying human wants directly, then its qualitative difference from the coat disappears. The linen's value is the same as the coat, so considered purely as a thing-with-value – or, as Marx puts it, considered as a value – the linen itself is the same as the coat.[8] If we now distinguish between the magnitude of the linen's value (i.e. the fact that it is worth one coat rather than two or three) and the form in which its value is expressed in the value relation (i.e. the fact that it is worth a certain number of coats rather than, say, a certain quantity of iron), and if we leave aside the magnitude, we can say the following: the linen's value has the form of a coat, so, considered as a value, the linen itself has the form of a coat.[9]

Here what must be meant by the word 'form' is the perceptible outer expression or appearance of an inner content, rather than a shape superimposed on a matter which is indifferent to it.[10] In other words, we must think of form in the way we do when we distinguish the outer form (perceptible aspects) and inner content (meaning) of a linguistic utterance, rather than when we distinguish the form (shape) and matter (material) of a statue.[11] It is in this sense that the linen, considered as a value, has the form of a coat. In fact Marx can now say that the linen has two forms. Considered as a use-value, it has a physical form: namely the totality of its physical characteristics, for they 'express' its usefulness in a perceptible way. This physical form is what Marx calls its 'bodily form' or 'natural form', although the second of these terms is something of a misnomer since these physical characteristics include both those that belong to its materials by nature and also those which have been given to it in the process of making those materials into linen. Considered as a value, by contrast, the linen has a form quite

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[8] 'Same' and 'sameness' in the quotation from Marx translate *gleich* and *Gleichheit*. It seems clear that the sameness or identity that Marx has in mind is qualitative identity (having the same qualities, as have two identical twins) rather than numerical identity (being the very same thing, as are the Morning Star and the Evening Star). A few sentences later he says that the linen 'as value-thing, is as like [*gleicht*] the coat as one egg is to another' (MEW 23:67, Marx 1976a:144).

[9] Marx makes the distinction between the form and magnitude of value most clearly in the first edition of *Capital*. See MEGA II.5:630-1, Marx 1978:137. NB The expression 'a coat' should be understood as having the broad sense of 'an unspecified number of coats exactly like the one in question'. If the linen's value were to double or triple, its value would have a different magnitude, but would still have the form of 'a coat' in this broad sense.

[10] Cf. Inwood (1992:108): 'In aesthetics, the *Form* of a work of art is its perceptible outer appearance ... in contrast to its inner content'.

[11] Hegel distinguishes between form as counterposed to content (Inhalt) and form as counterposed to matter (Materie), in a way that corresponds roughly to the distinction made here, in his *Science of Logic* (Hegel 1986:88-95, 1969:450-6) .

distinct from its own physical form, namely that of the totality of the physical characteristics of the coat.[12] This is its 'value-form'. As Marx puts it in a passage in the first edition of *Capital*:

> In that [the linen] *equates* [*gleichsetzt*] itself with [the coat] *as value* – while at the same time *distinguishing* itself from it as use-object, what happens is that the coat becomes the appearance-form of linen-*value* as opposed to linen-*body*: its *value-form* as distinguished from its *natural-form*. (MEGA II.5:30, Marx 1976b:20)

It is worth emphasising that the term 'value-form' in these passages combines two distinct senses. On the one hand the coat's physical form is the value-form of the linen in that it is the outer expression of the value of the linen. Here 'form' refers to a certain aspect of the value of the linen (namely its outer expression as opposed to some other aspect of it). I shall call this the 'attributive' sense of the term 'value-form'. But on the other hand the coat is the value-form of the linen in that it is the outer expression of the linen *as* value, as opposed to its outer expression as use-object. Here 'form' refers to a certain kind of form *of the linen itself* (namely its 'value' form as opposed to its physical form). I shall call this the 'predicative' sense of the term 'value-form'.[13] The key to the transition between the first sense and the second is the move between thinking of the commodity as *having* a value (in which case the value-form is the form of the value that the commodity has) and thinking of it as *being* a value (in which case the value-form is the form of the value that the commodity is, the form of the commodity itself *qua* value). Marx alternates freely between these two ways of thinking about value, as can be seen in the last quotation: if 'linen-value' there is interpreted as the value of the linen then the term 'value-form' following it means the form of that value, but if 'linen-value' means the linen itself (considered as value), then 'value-form' means the form of the linen itself (again considered as value).

[12] Note that this totality of physical characteristics does not include the coat's number (the fact that it is one coat rather than two or three). It might have been more consistent for Marx to define the form of the linen's value as including both the physical characteristics and the number of the coat, since surely the linen's value is expressed in both of these together. As so defined, the form of the linen's value would include its magnitude, rather than being contrasted to it. However I follow Marx's terminology on this point.

[13] Grammatically, the difference is that in the attributive sense of the phrase 'the value-form of the linen' the word 'form' modifies 'value' (giving the meaning 'the form of the value of the linen'), whereas in the predicative sense 'value' modifies 'form' (giving the meaning 'the value-kind of form of the linen'). The distinction can be marked, in English or German, by using 'form of value' (Form des Werts) for the attributive sense and 'value-form' (Wertform) for the predicative, but Marx almost invariably uses the latter term even when an attributive sense is clearly present, and I have preferred to follow his usage in my translations and commentary, preserving the double sense of 'value-form' that this involves. The terminology of 'attributive' and 'predicative' is borrowed from Geach 1976, who uses it to make a somewhat analogous distinction.

To sum up then, for Marx the linen acquires a value-form by virtue of being worth a certain amount of a commodity of another kind. This is a value-form in both the attributive and the predicative sense: it is a form of the linen's value, but in so far as the linen is considered as a value it is also a form of the linen itself. Because of this the linen itself has two kinds of form: as a useful object it has its own physical form, but as a value it has the physical form of another commodity. This, its value-form, is completely distinct from its own physical characteristics.[14] It consists in the physical characteristics of a qualitatively different commodity.

There is one more point to make about the transition from the attributive to the predicative sense of 'value-form'. I have said that this transition depends on the linen being 'considered as a value'. But in turn, the linen becomes something that it is appropriate to 'consider as a value' only through its being related to the coat by the value relation itself. Suppose we use a truncated form of the value expression, saying that '20 yards of linen are worth something' without having any idea of what it is worth. Then it is only in an implicit sense that we can think of the linen as a value, as a thing-with-value, for we cannot say anything about what that value is. By contrast, when we say '20 yards of linen are worth one coat', we give the linen's value a form in our statement. We can now say what the linen's value is. This enables us to think of the linen itself explicitly as a value. In turn we can thereby think of the form of its value as a form of the linen itself, as a value-form of the linen in the predicative sense. These are logical facts about what is entailed by the value expression as opposed to its truncated form, and psychological facts about what is involved in taking these expressions seriously. But Marx thinks of them as reflecting ontological facts about what is involved in the value relation itself. Outside the value relation the linen is a value only in a potential sense. The value relation gives a form to the linen's value. It thereby *realises* the linen as a value; it constitutes it as a value in a full sense, so that it is appropriate to consider it as a value. In turn this constitutes the form of the linen's value as a form of the linen itself, alongside its physical form. So through constituting the linen as having a value-form in the attributive sense, the value relation constitutes it also as having a value-form in the predicative sense. This set of claims is implicit in both of the above quotations from Marx, but it is clearest in a passage from the first edition of *Capital* which is the direct forerunner of the paragraph in the later editions from which Ilyenkov quotes:

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So the relation between the value-form (in the predicative sense) and the physical form of a commodity can in fact be thought of as a relation between superimposed form and indifferent matter, on the model of the form and matter of a statue. This form-and-matter sense of 'form' always lurks in the background when the predicative sense of the term 'value-form' is in play. But see note 54 below.

> Thus through the *relative value expression*[15] the *value* of the commodity acquires firstly a *form different from its own use-value*. The use-form of this commodity is, e.g., *linen*. But it possesses *its value-form* in its *relation of sameness with the coat*. Through this relation of sameness the body of another commodity, sensibly different from it, becomes the mirror of its own value-being, of its own value-character. In this way it gains *a value-form different, independent and autonomous from its natural form*. (MEGA II.5:630-1, Marx 1978:137)

Clearly, it is the value-form in the predicative sense that is of interest to Ilyenkov, since it is in this sense that the value-form is the non-physical form of a thing and so can serve as a model for the general idea that things can have non-physical forms, or what he calls 'ideal forms'. Accordingly, in what follows I shall focus on the predicative sense, and when I use the term 'value-form' it will be with this sense in the foreground.

If it is the value-relation that constitutes the linen as having a value-form, then we need to know something about what this relation consists in. What is it, exactly, for 20 yards of linen to be worth one coat, or for the value of 20 yards of linen to be one coat? In the view I shall assume here, it is for it to be the case that 20 yards of linen can 'normally' be exchanged on the market for one coat. The assertion that they can normally be so exchanged involves a quantitative and a qualitative claim: a claim about the magnitude of the linen's value and a claim about its form. With regard to the quantitative claim, Marx recognises that in individual transactions commodities are often exchanged at above or below their value (for example, that 20 yards of linen are often exchanged for more than or less than the one coat which they are actually worth), and even that the average quantity of the commodity for which a commodity is exchanged in the market may deviate from its value for a period of time. However his view is that the mechanisms of supply and demand tend to drive the rates at which commodities are actually exchanged towards their values.[16] At any rate, some such equilibrating mechanism is necessary in order to be able to define the value of a commodity in a way that distinguishes it from the rate at which it can as a matter of act be exchanged in the market at any one time. So for a commodity to have a given value-magnitude is for it to be normally exchangeable for a certain *quantity* of another commodity. With regard to the qualitative claim, similar points apply. For a commodity to have a given value-form is for it to be normally exchangeable for a certain *kind* of

[15] It looks as if Marx should have said 'in the value relation' here, as he did in the later editions (MEW 23:66, Marx 1976a:143, quoted above). See note 5 above.

[16] See section 2 of Marx's *Wage-Labour and Capital* (MEW 6:402-7, CW 9:205-15).

commodity, in whatever quantity, although in individual transactions, or even for a period of time in the market as a whole, it may be exchanged with other kinds of commodity.

The value of a commodity is therefore constituted as what it is, as having the magnitude and form that it does, by the long-term behaviour of the market as a whole, that is, by the totality of the individual acts of offering-to-exchange-for, declining-to-exchange-for, and actually exchanging that make up this behaviour. Value is an objective feature of a commodity in the strict sense that the commodity possesses that feature independently of any one individual's ways of perceiving it or acting towards it, although not of course independently of the way that all individuals in the market do over a long period of time. Marx reinforces the claim that the magnitude of the value of a commodity is an objective feature by arguing that this magnitude is determined by the amount of labour-time currently needed to produce the commodity (relative to the amount currently needed to produce a unit of the commodity that plays the role of equivalent). But we do not need to accept this argument to appreciate that the magnitude and form of a commodity's value are objective in the stated sense.[17]

Up till now, I have restricted the discussion of the value-form to the simplest kind of value relation, one in which the value of a commodity is expressed in terms of a quantity of one other commodity. This is the form that value would take in a two-commodity market where exchange consisted in bartering one kind of commodity for the other. But in the last two paragraphs this restriction has begun to look strained. In order to complete this exposition, we need to see how Marx expands his account to include the familiar case where the value of commodities is expressed in terms of money.

Every commodity that has a value, has a particular value-form. The value-form of a certain amount of linen is a coat, the value-form of a certain amount of corn is (say) iron, and so on. However Marx distinguishes between different *kinds* of value-form.[18] If a certain amount of linen stands in a value relation in which its value is expressed in terms of a certain amount of just one other commodity, as in the discussion so far, then the linen is said to have the 'simple value-form'. If the linen's value is expressed in terms of alternative quantities of various commodities (for example, 20 yards of linen are

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However the definition of value given here does presuppose that there is *some* process that, over time, pushes the actual quantities of other commodities for which a commodity is exchanged towards the 'normal' level that constitutes its value-magnitude. Likewise with regard to its value-form. If the actual ratios in which a commodity was exchanged for others varied completely randomly over time, then that commodity would not have a value as the term is defined here.

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Marx calls them simply different value-forms, since he does not make the terminological distinction that I make here between a particular value-form (e.g. a coat, iron, or corn) and a kind of value-form (i.e. simple, expanded, universal or money).

worth 1 coat, or 10 lb. of tea, or 2 ounces of gold etc.) then the linen has the 'expanded value-form'. If its value, along with that of all the other commodities in the market, is expressed in terms of a quantity of one particular commodity, while that commodity's value is expressed in terms of alternative quantities of every commodity on the market, then that commodity is called the 'universal equivalent', and the linen has the 'universal value-form'. And if by social custom a single commodity (such as silver or gold) comes to play the role of universal equivalent, then that commodity is called the 'money-commodity' and the linen has the 'money-form'. Furthermore, Marx sees these four kinds of value-form as developmental stages in a single process rather than as alternatives alongside each other. In a fully developed market the kind of value-form in play is the money-form.

It should be added that in each of these four cases Marx describes not only the commodity whose value is expressed in the value relation but also the equivalent commodity as having a value-form, calling the former a 'relative value-form' and the latter an 'equivalent-form'. Thus a commodity can have either the relative or the equivalent versions of the four different kinds of value-form.[19] In particular, it is important to distinguish the relative and equivalent versions of the most developed kind of value-form, the money-form: if 20 yards of linen are worth 2 ounces of gold then linen has the relative money-form (also called the 'price-form') and the gold has the equivalent money-form (or simply the 'money-form' for short).[20]

Finally, we can use the phrase 'the value-form as such' to indicate of a commodity that it has a value-form, without specifying exactly what that value-form is, or even of what kind or version it is. Thus to say that a certain amount of linen has the value-form as such is to say that its value has *some* form, or equivalently that it itself *qua* value has some form, without saying anything further about what that form is. From what has been said above, it follows that for a commodity to possess the value-form as such is just for it to be (normally) exchangeable in the market for some quantity of some other commodity (or commodities). In short, it is for it to be exchangeable as such. As Marx says, 'a commodity is in general *exchangeable* with another commodity insofar as it possesses a *form* in which it *appears as value*' (MEGA II.5:631, Marx 1978:137).[21] We can add that since Marx defines a

[19] Strictly speaking the equivalent-forms are not 'value-forms', since in the relevant value relation the value of the equivalent commodity is not expressed, i.e. its value does not have a form. However if the value relation is thought of as reversible, so that if A is worth B this entails that B is also worth A (and Marx implies from the start that this is the case by using the '=' sign to stand for 'is worth') then every value relation does 'indirectly' give a form to the value of the equivalent, and in this sense it can be said that the equivalent-forms are value-forms.

[20] Marx's own terminology is not always consistent, but it broadly conforms to that adopted here.

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commodity as a thing which is both a use-value and a value, and since it is having a value-form that makes a useful thing into a value in the full sense, we can say that it is having the value-form as such, or being exchangeable as such, that makes a thing into a commodity in the full sense. Hence Marx's (and Ilyenkov's) occasional use of the term 'commodity-form' as an equivalent for 'the value-form as such'.

Ilyenkov – to return to his account – affirms Marx's account of the value-form of commodities and in particular the idea that the value-form of a commodity is an objective feature of the commodity, yet a feature that is completely distinct from its physical form.[22] But what is noticeable about Ilyenkov's account of the value-form is that he treats the equivalent versions of it as paradigmatic. This fact is disguised by his use of quotations from Marx which refer to the relative value-form, but it can be demonstrated as follows.

Ilyenkov, like Marx, thinks of the value relation as a relation of representation: 'the value of the linen is represented, expressed, "embodied" in the form of the coat' (DI 199, CI 85, quoted above). In this relation it is the equivalent commodity (coat) that represents, and the other commodity (linen) – or rather its value – that is represented. For Ilyenkov this 'representing' is a crucial aspect of the value-form. Yet when he subsequently refers to it he consistently portrays the commodity that has the value-form (or else that value-form itself) as representing another commodity (or its value). For example he says that the value-form is perceived 'as the form of an external thing, not as its palpable bodily form, but as the form of another equally palpable bodily thing that it represents (expresses, embodies)' (DI 200, CI 86).[23] This makes sense only if the thing that has the value-form is the coat rather than the linen, for it is the coat that represents, expresses or embodies the linen, or more exactly its value, rather than vice versa. It follows that on such occasions he must be thinking of the value-form in question as an equivalent form.

In Marx, as I have presented him, the term 'value-form' refers primarily to the relative version of that form and only derivatively to the equivalent version. In Ilyenkov, by contrast, it seems that the priority is reversed, so that when he uses the term 'value-form' we should assume that it is primarily the

Cf. MEGA II.5:38, Marx 1976b:29, where Marx uses 'value-form' and 'form of exchangeability' as equivalent terms.

[22] Marx goes so far as to speak of a commodity's relation with that other commodity in which its value is expressed as 'haunting' the head of the commodity (MEW 23:110, Marx 1976a:189).

[23] For another example, see DI 205, CI 89.

equivalent version that he has in mind. In the context of a fully developed market this means the (equivalent) money-form. In fact in 'The Problem of the Ideal' Ilyenkov's first example of an ideal form existing outside the head is precisely the money-form, in the shape of the 'hundred talers' with which Kant illustrates his refutation of the ontological proof for the existence of God (DI 181-5, CI 74-7).[24]

2. Market exchange and abstract labour

In turn, however, Ilyenkov thinks of the (equivalent) value-form of the commodity as representing not just another commodity or its value but something that lies beyond these, namely a form of human activity. Speaking of the value-form as an 'objective ideal form', he says that:

> what is expressed in it, what it 'represents', is a definite social relation between people themselves, which in their eyes assumes the fantastic form of a relation between things. In other words, what is 'represented' here is the form of people's activity, the form of life activity which they realise together, which has taken shape completely spontaneously 'behind the back of consciousness' and is objectively fixed in the shape of the relation between things described above, as a thing. From this, and this alone, arises the ideality of such a 'thing', its 'sensuous-supersensuous' character. (DI 200, CI 86)

From what has been said so far, it might be surmised that the 'social relation between people' or the 'form of people's activity' that is represented by the value-form of the commodity is market exchange, for it is the social practices of market exchange over time that constitute things as having a value-form,

[24] In his 1962 encyclopaedia article 'Ideal'noe' (The Ideal), an amended version of which is translated as essay 8 of his *Dialectical Logic*, Ilyenkov's treatment of the value-form as an example of ideality focuses almost exclusively on the (equivalent) money-form. There he says that the money-commodity is transformed 'into the *representative of any other body* ... In other words, it is the *external embodiment of another thing*, not [of] its sensuously perceived image but rather [of] *its essence*, i.e. the *law* of its existence within the system' (Ilyenkov 1977b:272).

whether relative or equivalent.[25] However a few sentences later Ilyenkov appears to undermine this expectation by saying instead that what is represented is a form of *labour*:

> What is embodied and 'represented' here is the definite form of labour, the definite form of human objective activity, that is, of the transformation of nature by social man. (DI 200, CI 86).

Furthermore, in his subsequent restatements Ilyenkov consistently reasserts that the value-form represents a form of labour. For example:

> The value of a thing presented itself as the objectified[26] labour of man, and therefore the value-form turned out to be nothing else but the objectified form of this labour, as a form of human life activity, which appeared to men in the form of the thing they had transformed. (DI 209, CI 92)[27]

To clarify how for Ilyenkov the value-form can represent both a social relation between people and a form of labour, we need to return to the passage in Marx from which he draws the phrase about social relations between people and relations between things. Again, the clearest version of this passage is not the well-known one in the section on commodity fetishism in the later editions of *Capital*, but its forerunner in the first edition. There Marx begins by asserting that products are constituted as values of particular magnitudes only by their incorporation into our 'intercourse':

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In what follows, I shall take it that when Marx and Ilyenkov refer to social relations between people they have in mind 'interactional relations', that is, ones that consist in each case of two or more individuals thinking of and acting towards each other in a certain standard pattern of complementary ways over some period of time. Examples apart from market exchange would be friendship, vassalage and democracy. 'Social practices' captures roughly the same idea, although it does not carry the same implication of complementarity. Such relations are of a different kind from the 'relations between things' that Ilyenkov refers to in the quotation above, namely value relations, which consist simply in one commodity being worth a certain amount of another. Marx typically uses *Beziehung* for the former kind of relation and *Verhältnis* for the latter (or for the former in so far as it is realised through the latter).

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DI has 'vergesellschaftete' (socialised) here, but given the context this looks like a mistake for 'vergegenständlichte' (objectified). This would allow Ilyenkov to be making exactly parallel points about value and the value-form in the passage. CI has 'reified' in both places.

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Cf. a passage shortly before this one, where Ilyenkov says that in *Capital* the value-form is the reified form of 'labour, as physical human labour transforming the physical body of nature' (DI 207-8, CI 91).

> The fact that the products of labour, such useful things as coat, linen, wheat, iron etc. are *values*, *definite magnitudes of value*, and in general *commodities*, are properties which of course pertain to them only in *our intercourse* and not by nature like, for example, the property of being heavy or being warming or nourishing. (MEGA II.5:637, Marx 1978:142)

He now goes on to characterise that intercourse, which must presumably be identified with market exchange, in terms of a 'social relation between the producers'. Commodity fetishism then consists in misconstruing the value-magnitude and the value-form of commodities as properties that they have by nature when in fact they are properties that they have only by being incorporated into this social relation:

> Now the fact that e.g. *20 yards of linen = 1 coat* or *20 yards of linen are worth 1 coat* only expresses the fact that ... tailors and weavers enter into a definite *social relation of production*. It is a *definite social relation between the producers*, in which they *equate* [*gleichsetzen*] their different types of labour *as human labour*. It is not less a *definite social relation between producers*, in which they *measure* the magnitude of their labours *by the duration of expenditure of human labour-power*. But *within our intercourse these social characters* of their own labours *appear* to them as *social natural-properties*, as *objective* determinations *of the products of labour themselves*, the sameness of human labours *as a value-property* of the products of labour, the *measure* of the labour by the socially necessary labour-time as *the magnitude of value* of the products of labour, and finally the social relation between the producers through their labours appears as a *value-relation* or *social relation between these things*, the products of labour. (Ibid.)[28]

If we leave aside again the issue of the magnitude of value, it is noticeable here that Marx presents the value-form (as such) of the products *both* as something constituted by the 'social relation' between the producers *and* as an expression of a 'social character' of the labours involved in making them. How is this possible?

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[28] The equivalent passage in the second edition is at MEW 23:86-7, Marx 1976a:164-5, culminating in the assertion that in the value-relation, 'It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things'.

For Marx, it is possible because the specific social character in question, which he calls here 'the sameness of human labours' but elsewhere the character of being 'universal human labour', 'abstract universal labour' or simply 'abstract labour', is inseparable from the social relation of market exchange.[29] In any society with a division of labour, individual acts of labour have a social character *in general*: that means to say, they function as a part of the totality of acts of labour in the society in producing the totality of goods that will fulfil the wants and needs of the members of that society. What distinguishes abstract labour from other kinds of labour is the specific way in which this 'insertion' into the totality of labours is achieved. This is its *specific* social character, 'the specific form in which labour obtains a social character' (MEW 13:20, Marx 1970:32).[30] In a society in which everyone agreed democratically how to divide the tasks that needed doing, for example, an individual act of labour would obtain its social character by virtue of the fact that in performing it the worker would be implementing such an agreement. In a commodity-producing society, by contrast, there is no such advance agreement. The labours of different producers are co-ordinated to form a totality that meets the wants and needs of society as a whole only through the signals of the market, and a given act of labour gains its place within this totality only through the sale of its products on the market. If its products fail to sell, then it is redundant from the point of view of this totality and fails to find such a place in it. Abstract labour is labour that gains its social character in this way.

Thus abstract labour is labour whose specific social character, or (as I shall now say) specific social form, consists in its gaining its social character through the sale of its products on a market.[31] In particular, this must be a market with a money-commodity, since only through the comparative pricing of different products in terms of the same commodity that occurs in such a market it is possible to co-ordinate a multiplicity of labours. The term 'abstract' is appropriate for such labour because by selling

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The account of abstract labour in the following paragraphs follows that given in the 1920s by the Soviet economist I.I. Rubin (Rubin 1973:131-58). See also Arthur 1979. To substantiate the account I rely, as does Rubin, on Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and the first edition of *Capital.* It is clear from his terminology and examples that Ilyenkov was familiar with both of these texts of Marx's. I am not aware of whether he knew Rubin's work.

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Marx himself sometimes, as in this quotation, uses the term 'social character' to mean what I have called 'social character in general' (and from now on call just 'social character'), but sometimes to mean what I have called 'specific social character'. It is usually clear from the context which he has in mind.

31 Marx calls abstract human labour a 'specific social form' of labour at MEGA II.5:41, Marx 1976b:32, quoted below. It is worth noticing that the term 'social form of labour' can also be read in an attributive sense, to mean 'form of the sociality of labour' (as opposed to the form of some other feature it has), as well as in a predicative sense, to mean 'social form of labour itself' (as opposed to its physical form). The transition from the attributive to the predicative sense is legitimate if labour is thought of as essentially social. In this article I use the term in the predicative sense.

the product for money its producer proves that the particular labour that went into making it is substitutable for any of the labours that have gone into the other products on the market, since all products are for sale in exchange for some quantity or another of money, and the producer can therefore use some quantity or another of this particular labour to obtain any other product instead of having to make that other product. In the sense that it can be substituted for all those other labours, this labour has a 'sameness' with them, and an 'abstractness' from its particular characteristics as the production of its own particular product.

A central feature of abstract labour is that it gains its social character in two stages. In a first stage, individuals labour to produce products which they think will be saleable, and in the second stage they actually sell them.[32] In the first stage their labours are 'private', in that it is not yet certain whether they will actually function as part of the totality of labours in society, in other words whether they do have a social character. It is only when a products is sold that the labour that made it is assured a place in the totality of labours, that its social character is confirmed. So in the case of abstract labour:

> The point of departure is not the labour of individuals as social, but on the contrary the particular labours of private individuals, i.e. labours which only prove themselves as universal social labour by the supersession of their original character in the exchange process. Universal social labour is not a ready-made presupposition but an emerging [*werdendes*] result. (MEW 13:31-2, Marx 1970:45)

We can make the 'emerging' or 'coming to be' quality of abstract labour explicit by distinguishing between what I shall call 'actual' and 'latent' abstract labour. A given act of labour is constituted as 'actual abstract labour' by the fact that its product is sold in the market. It is constituted as 'latent abstract labour' by the fact that it is carried out with the *aim* of selling its products on the market. The specific social form of abstract labour is one which any given act of labour acquires at first latently, through its orientation towards the sale of its product, and then actually, through the successful sale of that product. The sale of the product is the realisation of its labour as abstract labour.[33]

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[32] In my exposition of the value-form and the form of abstract labour I follow Marx in initially conceiving the market as one in which individuals sell the products of their own labour (see MEW 23:123, Marx 1976a:203). Marx's view is that in its fully developed form the market becomes a capitalist market, in which the roles of producer and seller are divided between wage-labourer and capitalist, but this development does not substantially affect the concepts of value-form or abstract labour.

[33] This realisation is connected to the realisation, described above, of the product as a value, although the present realisation is accomplished in time by the act of sale, whereas that one was brought about logically by the fact of exchangeability.

To describe the sale of products as the 'realisation' of the labour that went into them as abstract labour, and this labour as already 'latently' abstract in advance of the sale, is not just a matter of terminological whim. By describing market exchange as the realisation of the activities of producing goods for the market, it expresses the dependence of market exchange on these activities: the fact that over the long term the social relation of market exchange cannot sustain itself unless it forms part of a more inclusive social relation made up of the totality of the activities of production-with-the-aim-of-exchange and of exchange itself in a multi-product market. I shall call this inclusive social relation the 'production-for-exchange relation'. It is this social relation, rather than the social relation of market exchange alone, that must be seen as endowing things with the value-form. And this relation is inseparable from labour that has the specific social form of being abstract labour. For members of a society to engage in the production-for-exchange relation is for their labour to have the (emerging) form of abstract labour, and vice versa.[34]

So Ilyenkov's claim that the value-form represents both a 'definite social relation between people' and 'a definite form of labour' is vindicated by Marx's account of the form of labour in question. The value-form 'represents' both of these in the sense that things acquire the value-form, whether relative or equivalent, by virtue of being incorporated into the production-for-exchange relation, or to put it another way, by virtue of being the products of labour that has the specific social form of (actual) abstract labour. So if a product has the value-form, this is a sign that has been incorporated into that social relation, or equally that it has been produced by labour with that specific social form.

However the move from seeing the value-form as constituted by a social relation to seeing it as constituted by a specific social form of labour has some cost. For just as the value-form of the product is completely distinct from its physical form, so that for example if the market were abolished products would lose their value-form without any change to their physical form, so the same must be true of the specific social form of the labour that constitutes it. It must be completely distinct from the physical form of that labour, that is, from those of its characteristics in virtue of which its products have the physical properties that they do.[35] Marx says that:

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[34] Here Marx reconciles the concept of 'alienated labour' which was central to his 1844 writings with that of 'social relations of production', the key concept of his later theory of history. For abstract labour is the successor-concept to alienated labour.

[35] No doubt those properties will include intentional as well as behavioural ones, but I shall not go into that here.

> none of these private labours in its natural form possesses this specific social form of abstract human labour, just as little as the commodity in its natural form possesses the social form of a mere coagulation of labour, or of value .... the *social form* is a form which is different from the natural forms of the actual useful labours, foreign to them, and abstract. (MEGA II.5:41, Marx 1976b:32)[36]

So although Marx (and Ilyenkov) can say that the value-form is constituted by, and so 'represents', a form of labour, the form in question cannot be a physical form. It is significant that, in summarising Marx's view, Ilyenkov does not acknowledge this point. In the passages quoted above he simply says that the value-form represents or objectifies a 'form of labour', or a form of 'the transformation of nature by social man'. He does not specify that the form in question is a specific social form rather than a physical form of labour.

3. Ilyenkov and ideal forms

With this point I conclude my summary of Marx's theory of the value-form and of Ilyenkov's account of it, and turn to look at how Ilyenkov generalises that account to his own account of ideality, so that the value-form can be seen as a 'typical and characteristic case of ideality in general' (DI 207, CI 90-91, quoted above).

In the light of the account of the value-form given above, a natural way to think of this generalisation as working is as follows. What Ilyenkov extracts from Marx's account of the value-form, and generalises to produce his own account of the ideal, is the idea that social relations between people can constitute the things that are incorporated into them as having features which are distinct from their physical properties and yet objective in the sense stated earlier. So the social relation of production-for-exchange constitutes the things that are produced and exchanged within it as values and as possessors of the value-form. Similarly, we could say that the social relation of giving constitutes the things that are given as gifts, or as having 'the gift-form'. In general, the ideal forms of things would

[36] Marx attempted to highlight this point in the later editions of *Capital* by defining labour's property of being abstract labour in contrast to its property of being 'concrete labour', i.e. of being labour that produces use-values (MEW 23:61, Marx 1976a:137). Unfortunately this conflates the distinction between labour's specific social form and its physical form with a distinction between the property of being labour as such and the property of being labour of a particular physical form. The result has been a persistent failure in readers of Marx to recognise that abstract labour is a specific social form of labour.

be those features which they have only by virtue of being incorporated into some social relation or other.[37]

Let us call the interpretation of Ilyenkov's ideal forms arrived at here the 'constitution by social relations' interpretation.[38] A number of objections could be raised against the view that it is true to Ilyenkov's own conception, but I believe that there is one that is decisive. This is that in this interpretation there is no necessary connection between a thing having an ideal form and it, or its form, 'representing' other things. It is true that a gift, or its gift-form, can be said to 'represent' the social relation of giving. But it would be stretching the meaning of representation to say that it 'represents' all other gifts. By contrast, Ilyenkov insists that 'representing' other things is an essential characteristic, not only of the value-form, but of ideality in general:

> This relation of representation is a relation in which one sensuously perceivable thing, while remaining itself, performs the role or function of representative of quite another thing, or, to be more precise, of the universal nature of that other thing, that is, of something 'other' which in sensuous, bodily terms is quite unlike it, and thereby acquires a new plane of existence, and it was this relation that in the Hegelian terminological tradition gained the title of 'ideality'. (DI 197, CI 84)

It is true that Ilyenkov goes on to present his own conception of ideality (which he identifies as Marx's, portraying himself merely as its interpreter) as superseding Hegel's. But he immediately makes it clear that in this supersession the element of representation is preserved, for in turning from Hegel to Marx, he begins by pointedly quoting Marx's statement that 'price or the money-form of commodities is, like their value-form in general ... an *ideal or represented* form' (DI 198-9, quoted above; emphasis added).[39] As we have seen Ilyenkov understands the representation in question as the

[37] Such a generalisation of Marx's account of the value-form is suggested by Anton 1974, from whom I have taken the example of a gift. Anton presents his suggestion in terms of 'constitutive rules', rules which state what one has to do, for example, for one's action to count as giving, or for the object of the action to count as a gift. But I take it that a constitutive rule is itself simply a formulation of the internal structure of a social relation (or, in Anton's terminology, of a social practice). To be understood properly, Anton's article needs to be read in conjunction with chapter 8 of Austin 1962.

[38] It is the interpretation which I believe David Bakhurst adopts in his account of Ilyenkov's ideal, the most substantive to have appeared in English (Bakhurst 1991:175-215). Despite my differences with it, I am greatly indebted to Bakhurst's account.

[39] In the light of the above discussion, from Ilyenkov's point of view Marx should really have said 'an ideal or representing form'. At points like this a tension becomes apparent between Ilyenkov's conception of the ideal and the more conventional way in which Marx himself uses the word.

representing not just of a social relation or of a form of human activity, but also of other physical things.[40] So clearly Ilyenkov places himself within 'the Hegelian terminological tradition' that he describes here.[41]

I therefore propose to outline a different view of the way in which Ilyenkov generalises from Marx's theory of the value-form, leading to a different interpretation of his ideal forms. As starting point, notice that Ilyenkov repeatedly insists that the ideal is not simply a form of things, nor for that matter simply a form of social activity. It is a form of social activity embodied as the form of a thing. Ideality achieves existence 'only as a reified and reifiable form of activity – as a form of activity that has become and is becoming the form of an object' (DI 203, CI 88). The ideal is to be grasped as 'the form of dynamic activity of social man that is embodiable in things ... As activity under the form of a thing, or conversely as a thing under the form of activity, as a 'moment' of this activity, as its fluid metamorphosis' (DI 204, cf. CI 89). Most explicitly of all:

> The ideal form is a form of the thing, but outside this thing, in man as a form of his dynamic life activity, as goals and needs. Or conversely, it is a form of man's dynamic life activity, but outside man, as a form of the thing created by him. 'Ideality' itself exists only in the constant alternation of these two forms of its 'external embodiment' without coinciding with either of them taken separately. It exists only through the unceasing process in which the form of activity transforms itself into the form of the thing, and conversely – the form of the thing into the form of activity (of social man of course). (DI 222, CI 98)[42]

These two aspects of the ideal are so closely related that it is impossible to grasp the ideal through either of them alone, for:

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[40] Bakhurst (1991:182-3) recognises that for Ilyenkov the ideal intrinsically involves representation, but construes this exclusively as a matter of the representation of a form of human activity.

[41] Whether Ilyenkov is correct in attributing his own meaning of the word 'ideal' to Marx and Hegel as well is a question that can be left aside here. What matters is how Ilyenkov himself understands the word.

[42] Cf. the corresponding passage in 'The Ideal' (Ilyenkov 1977b:264-5), and the abbreviated forms of this characterisation of the ideal at DI 201 (CI 87) and DI:209 (a passage not included in CI). It should be noticed that in the present quotation Ilyenkov alternates between using 'ideal form' in a predicative sense (the ideal form of the thing or activity, as opposed to its physical form) and in an attributive sense (the form of the ideality of the thing or activity) in this passage. Normally he uses 'ideal form' in the predicative sense.

> As soon as it is fixed as the 'form of a thing' it begins to tease the theoretician with its 'un-thinglikeness', its 'functional' character, and appears only as a form of 'pure activity', as '*actus purus*'. On the other hand, as soon as one attempts to fix it 'as such', purified of all the traces of material palpable corporeality, it turns out that this attempt is fundamentally doomed to failure, for after such a subtraction there will be nothing but a transparent emptiness, a formless vacuum. (DI 201-2, CI 87)

In defining ideal form as a form at once of things and of activity, Ilyenkov's usage departs from that of Marx, who understands the value-form strictly as a form of things, and abstract labour as a form of labour that constitutes things as having this form. However despite this revision it is not difficult to see Ilyenkov's conception of the ideal form here as a generalisation of Marx's view of the relation between one specific *kind* of value-form of the commodity, namely the (equivalent) money-form, and the abstract form of the labour that creates commodities. For in Marx's view each of these forms depends on the other. The abstract form of labour is realised by the exchange of its product for the money-commodity. But by definition the money-commodity is a commodity in which the role of universal equivalent is bound up with a particular physical form, and this binding-up is maintained only through the practice of exchanging products for things of that particular physical form. So labour can only realise itself as abstract labour insofar as there is a commodity that has the (equivalent) money-form, against which its products can be exchanged, while at the same time a commodity can only have and retain the money-form insofar as the products of labour are exchanged for it. The abstract form of labour and the money-form therefore depend on each other. Abstract labour depends on the money-form in that it is constituted as latent abstract labour through its orientation to the acquisition of money, and is realised as actual abstract labour through that acquisition. But the money-form itself depends on abstract labour in that a given kind of commodity is only endowed with this form through such a realisation of abstract labour, continually repeated. We could say that abstract labour both realises itself through the money-form and expresses itself in the money-form.[43] In that it realises itself through the money-form it depends on the money-form; in that it expresses itself in the money-form the money-form depends on it.[44]

[43] The idea that self-realisation and self-expression are interconnected in Hegel's thought is a central theme of Taylor 1975. See especially chapter 3.

[44] Marx comes close to expressing this mutual dependency when he describes the related mutual dependency of abstract labour and exchange, saying that 'on the one hand commodities must enter the exchange process as objectified universal labour time, on the other hand the objectification of the labour time of the individual as universal is itself only a product of the exchange process' (MEW 13:32, Marx 1970:45). Here he includes a quantitative dimension from which I have abstracted. For a discussion of the mutual dependency of abstract labour and exchange see Rubin 1973:148-151. For its original formulation by James Steuart, the 18th century

Furthermore, we can say exactly the same of the production-for-exchange relation. In general we can say that things are endowed with the value-form by virtue of being incorporated into the production-for-exchange relation. However in the case of one specific kind of value-form, the (equivalent) money-form, things are not so simple. The money-form is constituted by the production-for-exchange relation and yet that relation also presupposes the money-form. For unless at any particular time there is one commodity that has the money-form, so that all products can be exchanged for that commodity and all labours can be oriented towards the exchange of their products for it, the production-for-exchange relation cannot be sustained. So in the case of the money-form we cannot say simply that it is constituted by a social relation of production-for-exchange that is independent of it. Rather the production-for-exchange relation both realises itself through and expresses itself in the money-form.

It is the close interdependence of the form of abstract labour (or the production-for-exchange relation) with the money-form that, in Marx, is chiefly responsible for the more sophisticated forms of fetishism. On the one hand in the money-form a particular physical form, that of gold for instance, is closely bound up with a certain kind of value-form, namely the universal equivalent form. On the other hand, the money-form as a whole is closely bound up with the form of abstract labour. The result is not just a tendency to explain the peculiar features of the money-commodity purely in terms of its physical characteristics, an example, like the ordinary commodity fetishism described above, of what might be called 'physical fetishism'. It is also a reverse tendency to explain them purely in terms of the form of labour, or the social relation, which realises itself through that commodity, what might be called 'relations fetishism'. The interdependence of the money-form of the commodity and the abstract form of labour is close enough that it would have been legitimate for Marx to see them as simply aspects of a single form of the overall process of the economic interchange between human beings, nature and other human beings, a form which cannot properly be grasped as a form of things alone or of labour alone. And in fact he did give a single name to a more developed version of such a form, namely 'capital'. So it is significant that Ilyenkov's declaration of the futility of trying to grasp the ideal just as a form of a thing or just as a form of activity echoes, no doubt deliberately, Marx's remark on the 'naïve astonishment' of economists trying to understand capital, when 'the phenomenon that they have just ponderously described as a thing soon appears as a social relation and, a moment later, having been defined as a social relation, teases them once more as a thing' (MEW 13:22, Marx 1970:35). The

economist whom Marx described as the first person to identify, with his term 'industry', the concept of abstract labour (MEGA II.5:43, Marx 1970:58), see Steuart 1966, book 2 chapter 1, 'Of the reciprocal connection between trade and industry'.

alternation of physical fetishism and relations fetishism in economists trying to grasp the nature of capital recurs, according to Ilyenkov, in philosophers trying to grasp the nature of the ideal.

My suggestion, then, is that we should see Ilyenkov's account of the ideal as a generalisation of one specific aspect of Marx's theory of the value-form, namely his account of the simultaneous realisation and expression of the form of abstract labour in the money-form of the commodity. In this light Ilyenkov's focus on the equivalent value-form, and specifically the money-form, in his account of Marx becomes comprehensible, since on the present view it is the money-form, rather than the value-form in general that he takes as the starting point from which to generalise in order to reach his account of that ideal form. Accordingly it is the money-form that he should see as the 'typical and characteristic case' of the ideal form of things.

How exactly, though, can Ilyenkov generalise Marx's highly specific account of the relation between abstract labour and the money-form to a more general account of the realisation and expression of the forms of human activity in the forms of things? To illustrate how this could be done, let us take the case of an activity that is closely associated with a particular kind of thing, as for example the standard activity of cutting is with knives.[45] This activity can only be done well with a knife, and people only learn to do it by practising with knives. But at the same time human beings only make and maintain knives because this kind of activity goes on. So if we look at the cutting-form of activity and the knife-form of things as a whole, across the whole of society, each of these forms depends on the other. From this point of view what we have here is really a single form, the 'cutting/knife-form': a form of activity which realises itself through but also expresses itself in a form of things.

Furthermore, this form is a unified one across the whole of society. Through processes of imitation and mutual correction, operating under the pressures of physical necessity, a society normally develops a roughly standard way of cutting and a roughly standard size, shape and composition of knife.[46] As unified across a society, the 'cutting/knife-form' acts as a norm that guides individuals in their actions of cutting, making and repairing knives. This means that the cutting/knife-form will be more or less

[45] 'Activity' in the generic sense (the sense in which Ilyenkov uses it) means continuing or repeated human action in general. 'An activity' means a particular kind of such generic activity. By 'the standard activity of cutting' I mean the kind of cutting that one normally does with knives (although one could also do it with a ruler or one's finger), as opposed to the kinds of cutting that one normally does with scissors, axes or one's teeth. By 'cutting' in what follows I mean this kind of cutting.

[46] If this is doubted as a matter of empirical fact we could make it an analytical claim by defining a society as a group of people who sustain more or less unified forms of activity and of the things used in those forms of activity.

adequately realised in individual actions and individual things. Some actions succeed better than others as actions of cutting, and some particular things make better knives than others. And when an action does possess the cutting-form, or a thing the knife-form, it does so objectively, in the sense of 'objective' stated above.

Thus the cutting-form of a given individual action is distinct from, although related to, the action's physical form as a whole (which I define as the totality of the physical movements and the intentions involved in the action). It consists in those aspects of the physical form which enable the action to count, by the standards of this society, as a proper action of cutting. Similarly, the knife-form of a given thing consists in those aspects of its physical form which make it count, by the same standards, as properly a knife.

So although the cutting-form and the knife-form are objective forms distinct from the physical forms of the individual actions and things that have them, they are also related to those physical forms. In a given society, they 'supervene' on the physical forms: that is, whether or not an action has the cutting-form or a thing the knife-form is determined by its physical form. Yet they are forms which those actions and things have only by virtue of belonging to a collective social practice. In a society where cutting and knives were unknown, a metal shard from a fire might accidentally take the physical shape of a knife, but it would not have the knife-form. As Ilyenkov says:

> The humanly created form of the thing, taken out of the process of social life activity, out of the process of man-nature metabolism, is also simply the material form of the thing, the physical form of an external body, and nothing more. (DI 223, CI 99)

Likewise someone might accidentally, on one occasion only, engage in an action that looks like cutting to us, but it would not have the cutting-form. It is not just that people in that society would not have words for 'knife' or 'cut'. It is that the socially constituted forms of things and of actions that those words name would not exist, so that individual things and actions could not take those forms.[47]

If we understand Ilyenkov's account of the structure of an 'ideal form' in this way, we can see how it makes sense to say that this form cannot be grasped either as a form of things or as a form of activity. The knife-form as a form of things is intelligible only in the context of actions with the cutting-form,

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What if someone taught themselves to cut for the first time, and then passed the trick onto others? Then we would have to talk of the form of cutting coming into existence in that society.

and the cutting-form as a form of actions is intelligible only in a world in which there are things with the knife-form. The two forms have to be seen as aspects of a single form. I have said that this single form acts as a 'norm' which individual things and actions match more or less adequately, so it cannot be identified with the physical form of any single thing or action. Rather, it exists only in the totality of things and actions that more or less adequately have the form, and in the social processes of imitation and correction whereby individuals reproduce that form in the things they use and in their actions.

Understood in this way, Ilyenkov's ideal forms are akin to Plato's ideas or forms, for they serve as norms which individual things or actions realise more or less well, and in fact Ilyenkov sees himself as salvaging what is true in Plato's objective idealism.[48] The difference is that by seeing his ideal forms as sustained by social activity in interaction with nature Ilyenkov can locate them entirely within the material world.[49]

More immediately, though, we can see that Ilyenkov's account of the structure of an ideal form can indeed be a generalisation of Marx's account of the interrelation between the form of abstract labour and the money-form of the commodity. For the basic shape of the two-way relation in each case is very similar: the form of activity has to make use of the form of the thing in order to realise itself, but the form of the thing only comes into existence through the form of activity.

4. Social form and physical form

This interpretation of Ilyenkov's notion of an 'ideal form', and thus implicitly of his notion of ideality as such, has focused only on activities associated with a particular kind of thing which is used in the activity, and which is an artefact made by human beings. An immediate task would be to extend the account to other kinds of activity: for example activities like celestial navigation, which use a kind of thing (a star) that is not an artefact; like knife-making, which are associated with a particular kind of thing as the thing they make rather than the thing they use; or like promising, which are not associated

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See DI 186 (CI 78) and DI 206-7 (CI 90).

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In 'The Ideal' Ilyenkov apparently uses the term 'ideal image' (which is dropped in 'The Problem of the Ideal') as an alternative to 'ideal form' when he wants to emphasise the normative dimension of the ideal. For example, 'the individual realisation of the ideal image is always linked with some deviation or other, or rather with concretisation of the image, with its correcting in accordance with specific conditions, new social needs, the peculiarities of the material, and so on' (Ilyenkov 1977b:281). The connection between Ilyenkov and Plato is especially apparent in such passages.

with any particular kind of thing.[50] A further task would be to ask whether, under this interpretation, Ilyenkov's ideal forms can fulfil his claim that they are prior to, rather than consequences of, human 'consciousness and will' (DI 212, CI 94).[51] I shall not attempt any of these tasks here, but instead finish by commenting, from the point of view of the present interpretation, on one crucial issue in the comparison between Marx's value-theory and Ilyenkov's theory of ideal forms. This is the issue of the relationship between social form and physical form in the two thinkers.

Suppose we use the general term 'social form' to cover Marx's value-form, Marx's form of abstract labour, and Ilyenkov's ideal form. For both Marx and Ilyenkov social form is always distinct from physical form in the sense that things and actions have the social forms that they do only by virtue of the system of interaction between humans, nature and other humans of which they are a part; if they were taken out of that system then they would lose their social form. Yet for both, social form supervenes on physical form. That is, the physical form of a thing or action, once it is placed within that system, will determine what social form it has: 'determine' it in the strict sense that this physical form (in conjunction with the current state of the system of interaction in which it is placed) will dictate what its social form must be, so that from the physical form (and the state of the system) one can deduce the social form. If a commodity, such as a piece of linen, is produced in a given market society at a given time, then its physical characteristics (in conjunction with the current state of the system of production and exchange, and in particular the labour-time currently necessary in the system to produce something with those physical characteristics) will dictate what, if any, value-magnitude and value-form it has. So, given the current state of the system of production and exchange in which it is placed, the physical characteristics of the piece of linen will determine its value-magnitude and value-form. If the former were to change then the latter would too.[52] Likewise it is the physical characteristics of a thing that determine whether it can count, in our society, as a knife.

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The case of celestial navigation is especially important, since here there can be no process whereby the thing is shaped so that it matches its ideal form. So here the form of activity can 'express' itself in the ideal form of the thing only in the sense that it selects certain independently existing features of the thing which are relevant to the activity and treats those as the essence of the thing. For some comments by Ilyenkov on this case, see DI 221 (CI 97) and Ilyenkov 1977b:256-7.

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Cf. DI 219 (CI 97) and Ilyenkov 1977b:284-5. Clearly a great deal here will depend on whether we can make sense of a social form like the cutting/knife-form acting as a 'norm' independently of the 'consciousness and will' (in Ilyenkov's understanding of those terms) of the individuals whose actions and artefacts take that form.

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In a similar way, if an utterance is made in the course of a conversation in English then, *given* the current state of the English language and the particular context of the utterance, the physical characteristics of the utterance will determine its meaning. If its physical characteristics were changed then its meaning would change too. Yet outside a linguistic system the utterance would not have any meaning at all.

In this respect, Marx and Ilyenkov look similar. But if we consider the converse relation, then an important difference emerges between them. In Marx's theory of the value-form, if one considers a thing or activity in a given society, its social form generally does not determine its physical form, that is, its physical form cannot be deduced from its social form. The physical form of an act of labour cannot be deduced from knowing that it has the social form of abstract labour, and the physical form of a thing cannot be deduced from knowing either that it has the value-form as such, or that it has a certain kind or version of value-form (simple, expanded, universal, or money; relative or equivalent), or even that it has a certain particular value-form (e.g. a coat, iron). This is because, for each of these social forms, there is a multitude of physical activities or things that could take that form in a given society. Any one of the mass of useful products available in a society can take the price-form, for example, and any labour that produces one of those products can take the form of abstract labour. So in a given society one can deduce very little about the physical form of an activity or a thing from knowing its social form. In Ilyenkov, by contrast, there is not the same many-to-one relation between physical forms and social forms. Instead there appear to be a vast number of ideal forms such as the 'cutting/knife-form', each closely related to a physical form of activities and things. Accordingly in a given society one can deduce a great deal about the physical form of a thing or activity from its ideal form.[53]

Now there is one point at which this divergence between Marx and Ilyenkov disappears. This is in the case of the (equivalent) money-form. For in a given society one *can* deduce the physical form of a commodity by knowing that it has the money-form, since by definition this is a kind of value-form which is bound up with a particular kind of physical thing. So in this one case we can say that, in a given society, the physical form of a thing and its social form are mutually determining (that one can deduce either from the other), as they are in general in Ilyenkov.[54]

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[53] Ilyenkov never tells us what the criteria are for individuating ideal forms, but they appear to be fairly fine-grained. He in effect gives 'bread' and 'house' as examples at Ilyenkov 1977b:276. However, since he also suggests that ideal forms are the real ground of Kant's categories (DI 189-90, CI 79-80; Ilyenkov 1977b:283), he appears committed to the existence of a hierarchy of forms. Thus 'bread' and 'house' would be sub-forms of a higher-order form such as 'product'. The determination of physical form by ideal form could not hold for such higher-order forms.

[54] To the extent that physical form determines social form, and especially to the extent that this determination becomes mutual, the possibility of conceiving the relation of social form to physical form as a relation of superimposed form to indifferent matter recedes and disappears (see note 14 above). It should be added here that to speak of a 'mutual determination' of physical and social form when the social context is *given* is not to deny the fundamental asymmetry between the two forms: namely that a thing's social form exists only by virtue of its social context whereas it has its physical form whether or not it is in that context.

This parallel between the entanglement of physical and social form in Marx's money-form and Ilyenkov's ideal form of things is really only a result of interpreting the latter as a generalisation of the former in the way that I have done, so it should not come as a surprise. Nevertheless it has several important consequences.

Firstly, the fact that this parallel holds only between Marx's money-form and Ilyenkov's ideal form of things, and not elsewhere between Marx's and Ilyenkov's social forms, helps to explain Ilyenkov's failure, noted above, to point out that the form of labour which constitutes commodities as having the value-form is a social rather than a physical form of labour. The entanglement of social and physical form that obtains in the case of Marx's money-form sets it apart not only from the other kinds of value-form but also from the form of abstract labour. The form of abstract labour is not closely connected with its physical form in the way that the ideal form of an activity and its physical form are, on the view proposed here, for Ilyenkov. So here there is an important disanalogy between Marx's account of the value-form and abstract labour and Ilyenkov's account of ideal forms. Wanting to present his account so that Marx's could be seen as one particular instance of it, Ilyenkov needed to gloss over this difference. This, I suggest, can explain his silence on the fact that the form of labour that constitutes commodities as having the value-form is a 'specifically social form', not a physical form, of labour.

Secondly, the entanglement of ideal and physical forms in the present interpretation of Ilyenkov's ideal forms clarifies the difference between this interpretation and the 'constitution by social relations' interpretation described above. Clearly there is some similarity between these two interpretations. In each case ideal forms are in some sense 'socially constituted'. The central difference, though, is that in the 'constitution by social relations' interpretation the existence of social relations (i.e. forms of social activity) is taken for granted, and these social relations are then taken to constitute the ideal forms of things. By contrast in the present interpretation the ideal forms of human activities do not exist independently of the ideal forms of the things which are used in those activities. Rather, an ideal form of activity can realise itself only through the corresponding ideal form of things. An activity can properly realise itself as cutting only through the use of a knife, even though a thing can only be a knife by virtue of its suitability for cutting. There is an interdependence here which is not present in the 'constitution by social relations' interpretation. So when we say that ideal forms are 'socially constituted', we mean not that the ideal forms of things are constituted by forms of social activity that are independent of them. Rather, the ideal forms of *both* things and activities are constituted in conjunction with each other by the overall process of interaction between humans, nature and other

humans. Here 'society' must be understood as this process in its entirety (it must be understood, as it were, 'ecologically'), whereas in the 'constitution by social relations' interpretation it is understood simply as an interaction between humans.

The interdependence of the ideal form of the thing and the ideal form of the correlative activity helps to explain why these forms have to be bound up closely with the respective physical forms of thing and activity. In the 'constitution by social relations' interpretation they do not need to be so bound up. Because the existence and stability of the form of social activity is taken for granted, it can impose an ideal form onto a thing that may have very little connection with its physical form, as the example of the 'gift-form' illustrates. This form can be associated with a very wide range of physical things: all the kinds of things one can give as gifts. By contrast, when an ideal form of activity (such as cutting) can realise itself only through the corresponding ideal form of things, then the ideal and physical form of the thing must be much more closely connected. For in order to be able to engage in cutting one must be able to identify the kind of thing that cutting uses, and to identify it in advance of beginning to cut with it. And for this to be possible, the ideal form of the thing must be closely bound up with its physical form, so that the former can be recognised from the latter. It is as if giving could only be realised through the fact that the thing given had, independently of the fact of its being given, a particular physical form. To put it metaphorically, the ideal forms of activities have to be 'anchored' by the correlative ideal forms of things, through those ideal forms being closely bound up with their physical forms.[55] Since this is not the case with giving, it follows that on the present view the 'gift-form' is not an example of what Ilyenkov means by an ideal form.

Thirdly, because of the way that the physical and ideal forms of things are bound up in this interpretation of Ilyenkov's ideal forms, I believe that it can account, as the 'constitution by social relations' interpretation cannot, for the centrality of the idea of 'representing other things' in Ilyenkov's view of the ideal. To revert to the example of knives, it could be said that a knife 'represents' all other knives in a way that a gift does not represent all other gifts, and a leaf does not represent all other leaves. For in a particular thing that has the knife-form that form shows up in its physical characteristics, in its possession of a reasonably sharp blade, a handle of the right kind of size and shape, and so on. By virtue of those characteristics, the thing, simply as a physical object, presents

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I have implicitly suggested here that the same thing holds in reverse, i.e. that the ideal form of an activity needs to be closely bound up with its physical form, in order for it to 'anchor' the ideal form of the thing. It would take a further argument to substantiate this. The line of thought of the last two paragraphs was suggested to me by some remarks made by H.-G. Backhaus in criticism of a 'constitution by social relations' interpretation of Marx's value-form (Backhaus 1980:115-116).

itself to us, as members of a society characterised by the cutting/knife-form, as something that can be used for cutting. It 'represents' cutting. But thereby it also presents itself as a substitute for any other knife, in that one could cut with it instead of with another knife. So in a sense, as this physical object, it 'points to' or 'represents' every other knife, and thus even 'knifehood' as such. By contrast a gift, as a physical object, does not represent every other gift, because its properties as a physical object do not single it out as a gift.[56] But equally a leaf does not (in our society) represent all other leaves, because although its physical properties do single it out as a leaf there is no standard form of activity in that society with respect to which, as so singled out, it presents itself as a substitute for them. It is the entanglement of social form and physical form in the knife, absent in the case of both the gift and the leaf, that enables it to 'represent'. A particular knife, through its ideal form, represents other things with that form, and thus that form itself, as well as the form of activity with which all those things are correlated. Indeed, this roughly matches the way in which the money-commodity, through its money-form, represents all the other commodities for which it can be exchanged, and thus the value-form that is common to them all, as well as the form of abstract labour which is common to the labour that has produced each of those commodities.[57]

Fourthly, the parallel between Marx's money-form and Ilyenkov's ideal forms can be taken beyond the mere fact that in both social form and physical form are bound up together, in the sense that can each be deduced from the other. For in Marx this binding is a consequence of a process whereby a social form (the universal equivalent form) of things, which initially has no particular relation to the physical form of those things, gradually 'moulds' that physical form in its own image. For this form tends to attach itself to the kind of thing whose physical properties suit the ideal form, such as gold or silver, and to physically transform the thing to which it attaches itself, as when gold is coined in order to serve its function as money-commodity better. This 'real subsumption' of physical form by social form is one which Marx in his theory of value describes only in the case of the money-form, although elsewhere he describes a similar moulding of the physical form of labour by the social form of labour-employed-by-capital, which is a development of the form of abstract labour.[58] But something akin to such a 'real subsumption' is characteristic of Ilyenkov's ideal forms in general, as they have been

[56] What if it is something clearly manufactured to be a gift, for example in that it has 'Greetings from Helsinki' emblazoned on it? This aspect of its physical form may suit it to being made into a gift, but it does not constitute it as a gift, whereas the physical form alone of a thing is enough (in the right society) to make a thing a knife.

[57] See again the quotation from Ilyenkov in note 24 above.

[58] See the relevant sections of his *Results of the Immediate Process of Production* (Marx 1976a:1023-1038). The term 'real subsumption' comes from this text.

interpreted here. The cutting/knife-form, for example, continually moulds individual actions and also individual things so as to bring them into conformity with that form, through the processes of imitation and correction mentioned above as applied to the activities of cutting and of making, repairing, and preserving knives. It is true that Ilyenkov does not talk of individual actions and things becoming progressively more adequate to their ideal forms over time, but it would be quite natural for him to extend his account in this way. If he did then here again a feature that is specific to the money-form in Marx would become one common to the ideal forms of things in general in Ilyenkov.[59]

Finally, it has already been mentioned that for Marx the interconnection of physical form and value-form in the case of the money-form, and the close connection of this form with the form of abstract labour, leads not only to what I have called 'physical fetishism' but also to a reverse kind of fetishism, 'relations fetishism', and that Ilyenkov thinks that philosophers make analogous errors in their efforts to define the ideal as just the form of a thing or just as the form of an activity. Recognising that for Ilyenkov in a similar way the ideal form and the physical form of a thing are interconnected, and the ideal form of a thing is connected with that of the correlated activity, helps us to see how he can generalise Marx's notion of fetishism in order to turn it against philosophers who have rival concepts of the ideal. Such a generalisation can also be turned against interpretations of Ilyenkov's own concept of the ideal. Ilyenkov himself clearly thinks of his positivist opponents as falling prey to a certain kind of physical fetishism in their attempts to identify the ideal with brain events: this is 'a fetishism of nervous tissue, of neurones, axons and DNA' (DI 218, CI 97).[60] But equally it may not be too far-fetched to suggest that the 'constitution by social relations' interpretation of Ilyenkov's concept of the ideal falls prey to the reverse kind of fetishism, relations fetishism. Here this can remain only a suggestion, for a proper investigation of Ilyenkov's conception of fetishism is beyond the scope of this article.

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At this point it is worth mentioning that a likely philosophical inspiration for Marx's notion of real subsumption, in which the physical form of labour is remoulded so that it becomes an adequate expression of its social form, is Hegel's description of the process whereby some part of objective reality becomes the adequate expression of its concept, and that Hegel's term for the resulting unity is 'the idea'. For Hegel, 'the idea is the unity of the concept and objectivity' (Hegel 1986:464, Hegel 1969:756).

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Here the error lies not in identifying ideal form with the physical form of the thing used in activity but in identifying it with the physical form of the brain of the actor, so the analogy with Marx's physical fetishism is somewhat loose. But Ilyenkov shows that he thinks it is valid by immediately comparing this error with the error of thinking that a diamond that has not yet been discovered has a value by virtue of its physical characteristics (DI 218, CI 97).

To sum up, this investigation of Ilyenkov's account of the ideal as a generalisation of Marx's value theory has led to the conclusion that this generalisation focuses on the relation of mutual dependence between abstract labour and the money-form, a mutual dependence which is reproduced in the relation between the ideal forms of activities and the correlated ideal forms of things in Ilyenkov. A further conclusion is that the specific kind of entanglement between social form and physical form that characterises the money-form also characterises Ilyenkov's ideal forms in general. The interpretation of Ilyenkov's ideal that results differs substantially from the 'constitution by social relations' interpretation which at first sight suggests itself, but it is one that can make sense of a number of things that Ilyenkov says about the ideal, as well as about Marx. In particular, it can explain the strong connection he asserts between the ideal and the idea of representation. Needless to say, it is an interpretation that would require much more elaboration in order for us to ask whether it can provide the foundations of a genuinely social account of mind.

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