
Communication

The Project of Constructive Anthropology in Russian Empiriocriticism

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ABSTRACT: The article analyzes the main provisions of constructive anthropology developed in Russian empirio-criticism in the first quarter of the 20th century. The justification of non-metaphysical philosophy, which developed the “problematic” approach to cognition, made the new understanding of man possible. From this point of view, the essence of man is not a metaphysical constant, but is modeled on the basis of an appropriate organization of experience; the essence of man is determined by his existence and is constantly changing; the essence of man can be consciously adapted by directing his development and giving him the necessary characteristics; man as an essence is always man’s project, or scientific and philosophical concept; only by understanding man as a dynamic project can we justify free will and man’s capacity for creation. The project of constructive anthropology is fundamentally different from the philosophical anthropology developed in Germany in the 20th century by Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner, since the latter is essentially an attempt to preserve the traditional metaphysical interpretation of man.

Keywords: Constructive anthropology; Russian empiriocriticism; Human problem; Subject; Destruction of subjectivity; Gathering of man



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1. Introduction

Philosophical anthropology is, in the strict sense of the word, a product of European metaphysics, or rather, it is a specific form of its development in the period after the “end of classical philosophy”. In 1920s Germany, Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner established the school of philosophical anthropology, sparking an interest in man as a philosophical problem. Philosophers sought to revive metaphysics by presenting contemporary philosophical issues as if they could solve the problem of man. From this point of view, the German school of philosophical anthropology attempts to resist the progressive tendency to deanthropologize philosophy, a movement initiated primarily by the works of F. Nietzsche and the philosophy of life. The analysis of this tendency implies consideration of the main metaphysical positions—cosmocentrism, theocentrism, and anthropocentrism—in the context of the interpretation of man. In ancient Greece, when cosmocentrism was the dominant principle of philosophical thinking, man was understood as an element of the cosmos and, at the same time, as “the measure of all things—existing because they exist and not existing because they do not exist” (Protagoras). In the Middle Ages, according to theocentrism, man was interpreted as “the crown of creation”, created in the image and likeness of God. In the New Age, R. Descartes interpreted man as ego cogitans, focusing on attributes like free will and reason. Later, I. Kant viewed man as a transcendental subject, leading to the declaration that man is the constructor and legislator of the “picture of the world”. G. Hegel, who interpreted man as a “god who took a finite form”, brought the tradition of anthropocentrism to its logical conclusion. After Hegel, there was a crisis of classical rationalism, which led to the rejection of the essential understanding of man. Since the second half of the 19th century, the position of acentrism, or polycentrism, has become dominant. On the one hand, F. Nietzsche’s perspectivism and his idea of the plurality of the subject, and on the other hand, the Marxist doctrine of man as a set of social relations prepared the ground for thinking “in an empty space where there is no man anymore” (M. Foucault) and where man himself becomes the subject of philosophical modeling.

In Russian philosophy of the late 19th—first quarter of the 20th century, several variants of non-metaphysical interpretation of man were proposed. One is the theory of the “gathering of man” of Aleksandr Bogdanov, the leader of the supporters of empiriocriticism among Russian Marxists. Since Bogdanov, in this theory, expressed not only his views but also the views of most Russian Machists, we can say that in Russia in the early 20th century, a project of a new anthropology, which should be called constructive, was developed. This project bases itself on the following principles: (1) man’s essence is not a metaphysical constant; it models itself on the appropriate organization of experience. Thus, man’s essence determines itself by his existence and constantly changes; (2) since man’s essence is changeable and permanently evolving, it can be consciously adjusted, directing its development and giving it the necessary characteristics; thus, man as an essence is always man’s project, his scientific and philosophical concept; (3) only if we understand the human being as a dynamic project can we justify man’s free will and ability to create; (4) the essence of man is revealed through sociality, or through man’s belonging to the collective; the social being is ontologically primary in man and acts in relation to subjectivity as objective conditions of its development [1,2].

The socio-political and cultural context that developed in Russia in the early twentieth century largely determined the new understanding of man presented in Russian empiriocriticism. It was a time of total crisis of all the traditional foundations of life, which opened up an opportunity for creativity and the most daring experiments. The historical background and the reasons for the interest of Russian thinkers in empiriocriticism are well described in the works of Daniela Steila [3], M.E. Soboleva [4,5] and other researchers [6–11].

2. Critique of the Metaphysical Interpretation of Man

Let us consider the principles of constructive anthropology in more detail and begin with the critique of metaphysics and the justification of a new, non-metaphysical model of cognition since it is in this case that the realization of the idea of constructive anthropology became possible.

Metaphysics, as the object of criticism of Russian empiriocritics, is a unique strategy for comprehension of absolute truth. Historically, the idea of absolute truth, as well as the ways of its objectification, may change, but what remains constant is the certainty that there is and can be “access to reality”, which makes the philosopher a metaphysician. It is necessary, therefore, to analyze the possibility of this access, or, what is the same, to investigate the “metaphysical sense”—the sixth sense of a thinking person, to put it in the words of Aleksandr Vvedensky [12]. The Russian empiriocritics primarily focus on this, ultimately revealing that the “secret” of metaphysics is simple: it lies in dualism.

Dualism is a convenient means of representing being, a well-known procedure for explaining the given in experience by appealing to the super-experiential, with the result that being is treated as such only concerning an essence with an a priori character. The dualistic explanation of being, if we look at it as a mechanism for the production of objectivity, boils down to the following: the actual meaningful content of experience (what we deal with here and now, what is important for our life) is endowed with the attribute of truth (or falsity) by means of referring to the truth that is initially taken outside of experience, i.e., removed from among those objects that are subject to cognition. It turns out that the foundation of our knowledge always lies in what we can never know, and the possibility and development of our knowledge depend on the extent to which we do not know the cause of our knowledge.

The unknowable world of “things-in-themselves” thus serves the knowability of “things for us”. Its unknowability becomes quite obvious, understandable, and necessary. As a method of metaphysical cognition, dualism necessarily ontologizes the cognizable and the unknowable. This results in considering the content of knowledge and its conditions in isolation from the process of cognition. The perniciousness of dualism, as the Russian empiriocritics show, is reflected in the inevitability of the rupture of being into two non-overlapping parts: the world splits into the realm of ideas and the system of things, man splits into soul and body, sciences split into humanities and natural sciences, etc. Metaphysics, based on a dualistic interpretation of being, also ontologizes this interpretation. As a result, it declares the order of ideas identical to the order of things: the way we think of things determines what things are in themselves. Thus, we can only know the external world through its ideal representation in thought. As a result, the being of things is interpreted through thinking, i.e., through its rational transcription or, more precisely, abstraction.

Thus, metaphysics is such a system of knowledge that is based on ignorance, i.e., on a whole series of positions taken on faith and not verifiable in principle, and these positions, being hypothetical, are arbitrarily endowed with apodictic content. Metaphysical thinking is extremely simplified since it is closed in on itself, and this closedness, detachment from the reality of the external world, is characterized as the “access to reality”. It is not surprising that a fictitious picture of the world is created—structurally verified and logically consistent but having no cognitive value.

Metaphysical thinking, having no support in reality and not knowing the limits of its activity, argued Vladimir Lesevich, refers not to philosophy but to poetic creativity because “only poetic works are guided by the unity of any idea and performed by one person” [13] (p. 18). Therefore, metaphysical systems should be treated as works of art, which seem to decorate life but in no way contribute to its cognition. The metaphysical language of describing things abounds in allegories and metaphors, and this is not accidental. We should use metaphors and allegories only when objective reality is determined by the subjective arbitrariness of thought, because language cannot adequately express the imaginary”. Subjective speculation constructs many bold, complex, slender and majestic systems, in which even the facts most contradictory to its basic principles are given a meaning consistent with those principles” [14] (p. 59). The arbitrariness of subjective creativity leads to the fact that “abstract concepts are imperceptibly objectified, words are taken for objects themselves, and thus there appear a whole series of realized abstractions, such as essence, final goal, first cause, etc.” [14] (p. 59).

According to Aleksandr Bogdanov, metaphysical thinking is vulgar thinking because the metaphysician is engaged in solving “higher” questions. Vulgarity is reflected, first of all, in the opposition of the “higher” to the “lower”, which indicates adaptation to the generally recognized ways of thinking. Obviously, the very “concept of the ‘absolute’ is quite fictitious, for the content of concepts is taken *only from experience*, and in experience there is not and cannot be anything absolute” [15] (p. 153). Truths, which cognition deals with and which determine human existence, cannot be absolute: they are “living organizing forms of experience”; they should not only be “discovered” or “stated”, but should serve as a guide in human activity, “lead the way”, give “a fulcrum in the struggle of life” [16] (p. 219). The vital importance of truth is conditioned not by the fact that it is eternal and unchanging but by the fact that it can serve as a goal of joint action and a tool for achieving this goal. And just as the last goal would mark the end of movement, that is the end of life, the last, absolute truth would imply the end of thinking, of human creative activity.

From the point of view of Pavel Yushkevich, metaphysics is a natural product of “substantive thinking”. This thinking is characterized primarily by the fact that it is based on the belief in substance—an “artistic symbol” created by primitive man to systematize a rather limited range of phenomena, namely his experiments with solids. Thus, “substantialism is essentially an ideology of solid bodies, an ideology of tactile sensations elevated to the absolute” [17] (p. 145), and the limits of its applicability are determined by the degree of primitiveness of human experience. Thus, for ordinary life, the metaphysics of substantialism is quite suitable since it presents the being in its finite form and the world as a whole as a logically ordered totality of things, or a picture, as a result of which man acquires that “simplicity of view” which allows him to see something unchangeable, or “authentic”, in what is permanently changing. However, metaphysical thinking is unsuitable for philosophical reflection because it emphasizes the “authentic” at the expense of addressing the actual content of experience. Yushkevich contrasts metaphysical substantialism with philosophical “constantism”—such an approach to the interpretation of what exists, which makes it possible to create a picture of the world in its dynamics, reflecting, on the one hand, the ontological unity of things and, on the other hand, the relativity and infinity of their cognition.

3. Philosophy as “Problematic” Knowledge

All Russian empiriocritics, pointing to the failure of dualistic metaphysics in terms of philosophical knowledge, developed alternative projects and tried to justify the possibility of monistic thinking. The most interesting experiments in developing a system of “non-metaphysical all-unity” are the empiriomonism and tectology of Aleksandr Bogdanov [16,18], the scientific philosophy of Vladimir Lesevich [13], the empiriosymbolism of Pavel Yushkevich [17], the philosophy of life of Sergey Suvorov [19], the positive aesthetics of Anatoly Lunacharsky [20]. Despite the commonality of basic assumptions and principle statements, these doctrines are quite diverse. However, each represents the experience of modeling a new, non-classical knowledge. If we summarize the ideas expressed in this regard by Russian empiriocritics, we can call this knowledge “problematic”.

Characterizing philosophy as “problem” knowledge, it is necessary, first of all, to pay attention to the specificity of the concept of “problem”. In formal logic, we describe a problem as a situation where solving a question is extremely necessary but currently unsolvable. Consequently, a problem situation implies the *relevance* of the question posed and the *absence* of required answers. In philosophy, we characterize a problem by a situation of unsolvedness, but this unsolvedness is principled in nature. This means that the problem, as long as it is posed in philosophy, is valuable and does not imply the search for final solutions since even their potential existence destroys it as a problem.

“Problematic” philosophy, as understood by the Russian empiriocritics, first and foremost implies a refusal to produce systematic knowledge, as the relativity of any “picture of the world” has long since become obvious. The world

in which we live and which determines the subject matter of philosophy is not closed within the limits of reality, no matter how this reality is understood: empirically—as a set of phenomena existing here and now; transcendently—as a realization of a priori forms of cognition; metaphysically—as a system of eternal ideas or essences. The fundamental attribute of reality is its *processuality*, or dynamism, and thus its fundamental incompleteness and openness to creative transformation by man.

We live in a world of becoming, not of being, and we can understand this world philosophically only if we recognize the priority of the possible over the actual. It is the possible—that which might be, but which does not yet exist—that determines the essence of what is: reality is always projective. We conceptualize it in terms of the future, for only in this way can we rationally understand it and make it suitable for human existence.

That is why, instead of developing different strategies for grasping the Absolute and conceptualizing its content, the Russian empiriocritics called for the *correct formulation of questions* solely to discover their problematic nature. Thus the basic function of philosophy was also defined: it consists not in explaining the world or justifying the existence of cultural, spiritual, aesthetic and other values, but in actualizing the possible content of reality. Thus, the “overcoming” of metaphysics and the understanding of philosophy as “problematic” knowledge opened a new perspective of interpreting the concept of “man”, fundamental to the worldview of classical rationalism. Man became a *problem*: this means that, firstly, the anthropocentric principle of interpreting things ceased to be a determinant of philosophical thinking, since there was a dissociation of man and the subject of cognition; secondly, man “lost” the ontological foundations that allowed him to notice the “authentic in himself”, for example, such essential definitions as “universality”, “ahistoricity”, “autonomy”, “self-sufficiency”, “unconditional value”; thirdly, man realized his “derivativeness” and “finitude”, learned to look at himself “from the outside” and got the opportunity for projective, or creative, existence.

4. Man as a Problem of Deanthropologized Thought

The essence of man as a problem of philosophy is expressed primarily by the fact that the model of subjectivity formed in the rationalist philosophy of the New Age not only ceased to serve as a guarantor of the truth of judgments about things but also became an obstacle to philosophical thinking. Such a Cartesian model of man as *res cogitans*, corresponding to the requirements of a scientific discourse of the classical era, makes it very difficult, according to the Russian empiriocritics, to understand the key moments of reality and should be discarded. However, the destruction of Cartesian subjectivity and the critical analysis of the discourse that gave rise to the corresponding interpretation of man is only a precondition, albeit a necessary one, for prospective philosophy. The task of critique is not limited to discrediting historically established notions of man, but involves justifying the necessity of an “empty”, deanthropologized space for developing philosophical thought. In other words, the critique of classical subjectivity is not only to show the failure of traditional interpretations of the human being but also to justify the relativity, or conditionality, of any conceptions of the human being.

Obviously, if it were only necessary to show the falsity of the human model of classical rationalism, then exposing the fallacy of this doctrine would leave hope for the creation of a true one. In this case, the Cartesian subject would be understood as an obstacle to the correct perception of being, and with the removal of this obstacle, one could expect true knowledge not distorted by the laws of the “anthropological dream”. However, according to Russian empiriocritics, subjectivity is a fundamentally *unremovable* obstacle to cognition. In this status, we must include it in the picture of the world. Thus, this or that actual interpretation of subjectivity will be simultaneously asserted, on the one hand, as a subject and even a condition of possible knowledge and, on the other hand, as a creative fiction, the annihilation of which is essential for the continuation of philosophical reflection.

Characterizing the “empty”, or deanthropologized, space as a condition of philosophy, Russian empiriocritics picked up and each, in his way, began to develop the thesis of the “death” of man, showing that it is the thesis of human “mortality” that allows us to correctly put the question of what man is. In this respect, the influence of F. Nietzsche was obvious; his famous statement “God is dead” [21] (p. 593) put into the mouth of a “madman” was intensively discussed and variously interpreted by Russian empiriocritics (in particular, the “death” of God served as a stimulus and theoretical support for the justification of the theory of God-building, and the “death” of man, which logically follows from the “death” of God, initiated the creation of a “new” man) [22] (pp. 170–179). In addition, Nietzsche’s critique of the moral interpretation of the world and man enabled the Russian empiriocritics to abandon essentialist thinking and to come to the conclusion that it is not the essence that determines existence, but, on the contrary, existence determines essence. What is called and is a “human being” is determined by chance circumstances, such as the intertwining of “perspectives”

in the realization of the “will to power”, the confrontation of various “interests”, “needs”, etc. Therefore, it is *chance* that plays a key role here; we could say that chance is the cause of necessity: what we consider necessary is nothing other than what has already happened, that is, it has happened in this way and not otherwise; what has happened is irreversible and therefore necessary. Moreover, what has happened is always unique, which is inexpressible.

Man, as an accidental and, therefore necessary being, is known to have the capacity for self-reflection. As a result of self-reflection, he discovers himself as a problem when he abandons the traditional habit of “thinking only in the form of speech” [23] (p. 296), i.e., appealing to a priori entities or ideas in defining his essence. Man becomes a problem because he, when understanding himself as a “being of becoming”, has every time to define himself in some way, and every time he does it, he distances himself from his certainty, demonstrating the impossibility of any definition. As soon as he begins to think about who he is, man immediately ceases to be what he is. He “dies” as soon as he declares his “being”.

The “mortality” of man can be expressed in another way: it implies that man, in self-reflection, always turns out to be other than himself. Moreover, man’s “otherness” also turns out to be as elusive for self-reflection as his invariant “being”. Nor can it be grasped from the outside, and as a result, even instances such as the “Honored Interlocutor” [24] or the “Other” [25] cannot guarantee the unity of the person as other, so that the image of otherness is created anew each time, depending on a number of random factors. The problem of the human being thus appears not only as a problem of selfhood but also as a problem of otherness. Man conceptualizes himself as an existential variable or a *function* of the place he occupies.

We should note that Russian empiriocritics, in their reflections on the functional status of man, used the developments of European philosophy, primarily the ideas of F. Nietzsche. They also found confirmation of their views in Marxism, referring, for example, to the fact that K. Marx defined the essence of man as “the totality of all social relations” [26] (p. 3), thus emphasizing not only its socio-historical conditionality but also its ability to be endlessly transformed. On the other hand, in Russian philosophy of the late 19th—the first quarter of the 20th century there was an active process of analyzing subjectivity in order to achieve a new understanding of man. Discussions around the “alien self” were initiated by the works of Aleksandr Vvedensky [12,27]. Mikhail Bakhtin, stressing the danger of the gap when “the two worlds, absolutely not communicating and not permeable to each other—the world of culture and the world of life—stand against each other” [25] (p. 7), tried to overcome this gap with the help of the “philosophy of action” and insisted on the need to take into account “the unique oneness of the life experienced” [25] (p. 7). Finally, Vladimir Vernadsky, in his doctrine of the biosphere and noosphere, pointed to “the functional dependence of man, as a natural object, and mankind, as a natural phenomenon, on the environment of their life and thought” [28] (p. 13) and thus refuted the philosophical theories that asserted the self-sufficiency of man, his essential difference not only from the phenomena of external nature but also from other living beings. Since man cannot be properly understood outside the context of his existence, Vernadsky concluded that man is a function of the biosphere. It should be considered in relation to his environment.

5. Anthropology after the “Death” of Man

Problematic understanding of man implies a special way of studying him. It is obvious that man with no essential characteristics cannot be the subject of systematic research, which means that instead of positive knowledge about man, we should limit ourselves to making philosophical declarations. Indeed, how can one study man if his essence is constantly changing? The skeptical conclusion about the unknowability of man seems inevitable in this case.

Russian empiriocritics, realizing the reality of the threat of such a conclusion, tried to resist skepticism and agnosticism. First, they observed that the discovery of the fictitiousness of man’s *essential* cognition does not yet prove the falsity of his cognition *in general*. The philosophical criticism of the static consideration of man conclusively demonstrates that man has no ahistorical essence that would entirely determine his existence. But if essence is not subject to cognition, this is not the case with existence. By analyzing the latter—the diverse forms of human beings found in history and everyday life—meaningful statements about man can be achieved. This means that man should be studied mainly based on the past, that is, based on the history of his becoming.

On the one hand, each particular form of subjectivity is historically contingent and cannot, therefore, claim to be an adequate expression of the essence of man. On the other hand, each particular form of subjectivity—by virtue of the fact that it has already taken place—partly sheds light on what man is. After all, what happened became actual because it was possible, allowing us to consider man in terms of a particular realized possibility. By studying various moduses of human existence, we thus objectify the content of the concept of “man”, which is maximally accessible for philosophical cognition. In other words, it is not man himself in all his potential content subject to philosophical cognition, but the *traces*

he leaves in history and by which he is to be sought. Following the traces of man in the process of historical-philosophical research, we cognize what has already become real and, therefore really refers to the essence of man.

It is important not to try, based on the analysis of what happened, to get a complete picture of man by absolutizing the significance of his traces. Each trace allows us to consider man correctly and, at the same time, distorts his essence. For example, Cartesian subjectivity, if absolutized and regarded as the true essence of man, is certainly an obstacle to philosophical thinking. Therefore, it is necessary to criticize the Cartesian system of views first to be able to put the question of man correctly.

However, the same Cartesian subjectivity, when understood in the context of its relevant epoch, allows us to grasp something essential about man: his ability to model a picture of the world in which he serves as the legislating transcendental subject. Thus, the philosophical cognition of man implies comprehension of all his essential definitions that existed before. This is the collection of his traces, or, as the Russian empiriocritics put it, “the gathering of man” [29], a truly “objective” cognition of him. One very important methodological remark should be made here. The point is that turning to history in order to obtain knowledge about man, one cannot consider historical evidence as *facts*, i.e., as such data that allow only one and, at the same time, unambiguous interpretation. As F. Nietzsche showed, there are no facts but only their interpretations [23] (p. 281). This means that every human trait that appeared at one or another historical moment, although belonging to the past, is nevertheless connected to the present—at least in the context of its being singled out and conceptualized. We cannot, therefore, assert with complete certainty that the Cartesian subject, for example, is an objective characteristic of the relevant epoch and of the man who belongs to it. It is quite possible—and most likely so—that the Cartesian subject and the worldview associated with it are in many ways, products of contemporary historical and philosophical discourse. In any case, one should always treat facts with caution, allowing for the possibility of an infinite variety of interpretations that have the same right to exist.

Since historical material can be understood in different ways, depending on how and for what purpose it is actualized in the present, history itself turns out to be fundamentally viable, as noted by the Russian empiriocritics. The variability of history allows us to see in a limited number of facts a *continuum* of man’s interpretations. Moreover, by collecting images of man, characteristic of past epochs, we learn about man exactly as much as we *model* him *ourselves*. In this case, the famous maxim “To understand is to do” is true because the experience of cognizing man as the other one is simultaneously the experience of self-reflection. Thus, if we can understand subjectivity the way it seems to have been understood in some remote epoch, or if we can consider the functional status of man to clarify the appropriate epoch, this is enough to cognize something essential both in ourselves and in man in general. The adequacy of the interpretation of historical facts, as it follows from the above, plays no role here: if this or that interpretation has indeed succeeded, the subjectivity corresponding to it has already occurred anyway.

Finally, since man’s cognition is achieved only by studying the forms of man realized in history, philosophy is possible only as the *history of philosophy*. It is no accident that the theorists of Russian empirio-criticism paid great attention to the interpretation of the historical and philosophical process, proving that their philosophical position is a natural conclusion of all thinking humanity [30,31]. In the problematic approach to understanding knowledge, the historical past becomes the material for variant interpretations, and the “gathering of man” becomes man’s modeling. Philosophical experiments in the study of man of past epochs are the experience of interpreting his essence in the context of possible existence in the future.

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