



Saving philosopher Descartes: Valentin Asmus as a guardian of culture

Andrey Maidansky¹ · Maksim Maidansky¹

Accepted: 13 March 2023 / Published online: 21 April 2023
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2023

Abstract

Early in his career, Valentin Asmus gave a polemical lecture on Descartes’s dialectics, and during the “Thaw” he published a book on René Descartes’s life and scientific work. Asmus was the guardian of classical philosophical culture in the worst of times, when it was attacked by ideologically biased and semi-literate “Red professors.” They proclaimed Descartes founder of “modern idealism” and of a “mechanical worldview” hostile to dialectics. Asmus responded by arguing that Descartes had contributed much to the development of the dialectic and materialist view of the world—this was the only possible way to rehabilitate Descartes’s philosophical legacy from ideological accusations. In his 1956 book, Asmus gave an overview of Descartes’s philosophy as a whole. He was fluent in the philosophical techniques of Marxist *histmat* (short for “historical materialism”); at the same time, the portrait he draws of Descartes clearly shows the Kantian way of thinking, which Asmus learned from the schoolroom in the pre-revolutionary period.

Keywords Soviet philosophy · Dialectics · Materialism · Idealism · Mechanists · Cogito

Introduction

With the onset of social revolutions, the delicate threads of culture are inevitably torn and time comes out of joint. There must be people capable of pouring the centuries-old wine of culture into new bottles. Mikhail Lifshits, a younger contemporary of Valentin Asmus, dubbed this task “the Great Restoration of the truth of old culture,” *Restauratio magna*. Asmus’s life work was to protect the linkages of times in philosophy. He himself looked like the embodiment of this linkage. To students of post-war

✉ A. Maidansky
amaid@rambler.ru

M. Maidansky
maydanskiy@bsu.edu.ru

¹ Belgorod National Research University, Belgorod, Russia

generations, he was re-opening the Russian philosophy of the Silver Age, which by that time had almost gone into oblivion.¹ For Asmus himself, this pre-revolutionary philosophy and culture was the natural environment in which he had grown up.

In his first published work, “On the Great Captivity of Russian Culture” (Asmus 1919), while still a student at Kiev University, Asmus scolded Marx as the “great seducer,” who had caused “immeasurable harm” to world culture. Five years later, in his first monograph (Asmus 1924) Marx would appear as the pinnacle of world philosophy.

In Asmus’s last will, a portrait of Kant was to be placed in his coffin—near his heart. But the author of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, Lenin, declared war on the “reactionary line of Kant and Hume.” So Asmus’s transformation into a Marxist-Leninist could hardly have been his free choice. Rather, he acted as an artist or stage director who accepted a state directive. One day following World War II, virtually overnight, Asmus was taken to a meeting of the Council of Ministers and invited to give a lecture on logic. “Comrade Stalin said that we don’t know logic at all. And we would like to know what it is,” explained Vyacheslav Molotov, Minister of Foreign Affairs. Stalin himself was in the audience (Smirnov 2001, p. 41).

Soviet men of culture had to portray what officials wanted to see and how they wanted to see it. Ritualistic terminology and references to the founders of Marxism were a must, just as references to Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers had been in the universities of the Middle Ages. Even in modern times, Descartes had to find ways to reconcile with Mother Church. Was it not from him that Asmus took this lesson?

The Descartes debate

On 8 December 1927, Asmus delivered a major lecture entitled “Dialectics in Descartes’s system” at a meeting of the Philosophical section of the Communist Academy. The transcript was published promptly, in the first issue of the *Academy Herald* in 1928. This text would later become a chapter in the monograph *Essays on the History of Dialectics in the Modern Philosophy* (Asmus 1929).

Asmus was still teaching Marxian philosophy in Kiev in early 1927, but he was already renowned for his articles in the *Under the Banner of Marxism* journal. His polemic with Alexander (Sándor) Varjas, one of the leaders of the “Mechanists,” resonated widely. The Mechanists party was opposed by the “Dialecticians” party led by academician Abram Deborin. The two parties disagreed on the relationship between philosophy and natural sciences. Both modern science and philosophical generalizations of “scientific data” were referred to as the “mechanical conception of nature.” *Dialectics* comprised both the method of thinking and the portrayal of the world

¹As Piama Gaidenko (2001, p. 81) recalls, “Valentin Ferdinandovich was for many of us who studied under him the bearer of that very cultural tradition—interrupted for many decades—of which, without people like him, we would know only from books.” Nelli Motroshilova (2001, p. 55) echoes her: “V.F. Asmus has become for me the embodiment of a rare and therefore especially precious, yet not completely interrupted connection with the history of national universities.”

formed by translating the same “scientific data” into a quasi-Hegelian language, with its dialectical “spirals” and “jumps.”

Asmus’s dispute with Varjas also touched on the topic of Descartes. Varjas argued that Descartes, despite his noble origins, harbored bourgeois sympathies, as evidenced by Descartes’s living in Holland, marrying “a bourgeois girl,” and interests in meteorology and optics (which were of practical interest to businessmen). All this, according to Varjas, indicated that Descartes “inwardly broke with his class,” feudal aristocracy. Asmus regarded this kind of reasoning as a “vulgarisation of the tasks and method of sociological research” (Asmus 1926, p. 218).

In summer 1927, Deborin invited Asmus to Moscow (to the Institute of Red Professors) just a few months before he gave his presentation on Descartes. No doubt, he hoped to find in Asmus an ally against the Mechanists. The presentation was a sort of initiation. Asmus was expected to attack Descartes’s mechanistic outlook and his ideological successors, the Mechanists.

Asmus could not fail to understand this but, as we shall see, he refused to go along with the desires of the “Dialecticians.” One can hardly call Asmus a nonconformist, but neither was he an obedient soldier in the ideological wars. He had to embrace a Marxist creed, of course, but he nevertheless tried to maintain an intellectual integrity.

Descartes was in a similar position, unwilling to openly challenge the Christian doctrine or the Catholic Church. With great sympathy Asmus describes Descartes’s forced assurances that the Bible’s account of creation is “immutable truth,” and that his own cosmogony, a vortex theory of planetary motions, had no claim to more than “practical utility” (Asmus 1928, p. 142). No doubt, Asmus was testing this argument on himself, having found himself in similar historical circumstances, when Marx’s doctrine became an “immutable truth.”

Spinoza, Descartes’s philosophical heir, elaborated the rationale for such life strategy in the introduction to his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. Discussing how a philosopher should live among ordinary people (*vulgus*), for whom the words of holy scriptures are more convincing than arguments of reason, Spinoza formulates three “rules of life” (*vivendi regulae*). The first of these is “to speak according to the power of understanding of ordinary people,” and “to yield as much to their understanding as possible.” In doing so, the philosopher “can gain a considerable advantage.” It is useful to make friends with ordinary people, and dangerous to annoy them. When people hear words that are sacred to many, it is hoped “they will give a favorable hearing to the truth” (Spinoza 1985, p. 12).

Asmus was guided by the same rule of life. He mastered the language of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the technique of “histmat,” but tried to use them at a minimum and avoided ideological squabbles as much as possible.

For example, in his article on Spinoza (Asmus 1927), written in the same year as his paper on Descartes, Asmus pointedly ignores the polemic between Mechanists and “Dialecticians,” which was then in full swing. This was practically the only “peaceful” text on Spinoza in Soviet philosophy at that time. Not a single word is uttered on the works of Abram Deborin, who headed the Institute of Scientific Philosophy, and his supporters, the “Dialecticians.” Asmus refers only to the pre-revolutionary works of Aleksander Vvedensky and his Kiev teacher, Evgeny Sektorsky. This choice of allies seems rather adventurous. Vvedensky had once been a

leader of the Russian Neo-Kantians, whereas Spektorsky was a religious philosopher who had fled from the Bolsheviks to the West; he would be elected first chairman of the Association of Russian-American Scholars in the USA.

In the case of Descartes, Asmus was unable to evade polemics. There was a bitter debate on his report. A critical co-lecturer, Georgy Dmitriev, was supported by Mejer Furshchik, whereas Izrail Weinstein defended Asmus's position. The transcript is published together with the lecture by Asmus. The debate was conducted in the aggressively loud manner typical of the era, and right from the start it degenerated into fencing with ideological cleavers.

All the above-mentioned debaters belonged to the "Dialecticians" party, and Asmus was also regarded as its follower or at least a useful ally. However, as the debate showed, some "Dialecticians" were hostile to Asmus.

Dmitriev found "an interesting *parallelchik*² between Husserl and our speaker," whereas "this Husserl is an *out-and-out idealist*" (Preniia 1928, pp. 151–153).

Under the guise of intuition and the systemic character of science, etc., Asmus sneaks a suspicious Husserlian dialectic. This may be "dialectics" according to Husserl, but it is not our materialist dialectics. (Preniia 1928, p. 159)

In conclusion, Dmitriev chided Asmus for—having joined "us," that is, the party of "Dialecticians"—he shied away from scourging the Mechanists. Descartes is, after all, the founder of the mechanistic view of the world. What a marvelous occasion to cut the Mechanists to the heart! But "however much I paid attention to the words of Comrade Asmus, how closely I studied his article, I did not find the slightest mention of Descartes's mechanistic views either in the lines or between the lines" (*ibid.*, p. 146). Instead, Asmus seeks out *dialectics* in Descartes!

Asmus retaliated as best he could, demonstrating Dmitriev's ignorance, but he refrained from ideological counterattacks. As time would tell, Asmus's chosen course of action was the most prudent. Active participation in ideological showdowns for many "Red professors" would come to an unfortunate end. Dmitriev and Weinstein were executed as enemies of the people; Furshchik perished in the Gulag, in the Norilsk camp, above the Arctic Circle.

There are, of course, plenty of ideologically colored terms and passages in Asmus's writings. But he has never turned philosophy into a servant of Marxist-Leninist ideology, nor has he used philosophical arguments as a weapon in the battle for power or persecution of dissenters.

The issue around which the debate swirled was not so much historical and philosophical as it was *ideological*. Its main motive was the ongoing struggle for power on Marxist Olympus. Asmus wanted no part in this struggle.

Dmitriev sees Descartes as a forerunner of the hated Mechanists and draws suspicious *parallelchiki* with the enemies of dialectical materialism. Asmus had a very different goal: he sought to convey Descartes's legacy to the modern reader, to protect the great thinker from attacks by "popes of the Marxist parish." There was only one way to do this: to discover the seeds of dialectics and materialism in Descartes (as in any other philosopher).

²A derogatory diminutive for "parallel."

Lenin characterized this reading of philosophical texts as “partisan.” He saw in world philosophy a kind of Valhalla, a place of eternal battlefield between materialists and idealists, dialecticians and metaphysicians. Idealism is “merely a subtle, refined form of fideism;” like religion, it serves the interests of the exploiting class. One has to be an ass not to see this *cui bono* in the days of the last battle of proletarians of all countries against the world bourgeoisie. “Non-partisans in philosophy are just as hopeless dunces as they are in politics” (Lenin 1986, p. 307).

A few years later, when he analyzed Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, Lenin discovered that “intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism” (Lenin 1969, p. 248). But proletarian philosophers, for the most part, ignored this discovery. The term “idealist” became a black mark. “At our [Moscow University] lectures, the history of philosophy looked like an artless ranking: idealists (morons!) to the right, materialists (attaboys!) to the left,” recalled Valentin Korovikov (1990, p. 66). Serious, cerebral study of idealist philosophy was unwelcome. That is why Descartes’s philosophical legacy had to be salvaged for *Russian culture*.

Asmus mines for connections between Descartes and the materialist tradition in philosophy, starting right from Democritus. He finds these connections not only in the teaching of the material world as “extended substance,” but also in the theory of knowledge.

Knowledge arises from *senses* or *sensation*. Together with Democritus and with the whole of materialism, Descartes deduces cognition from the senses. . . . Like Sceptics, Descartes begins with a *critique of the senses*. . . . Descartes’s connection with skepticism, however, is purely external. On this point Descartes is strikingly close to Democritus and to Bacon. In Descartes’s teaching, as with Democritus, “skeptical” arguments are only a methodological device, not the last word of epistemological conviction. (Asmus 1928, p. 119)

The popular German handbooks on the history of philosophy, followed by Dmitriev, portray the case as if the rationalist Descartes did not regard sensual experience as the origin of knowledge. In fact, as Asmus explains in his reply (Prentia 1928, p. 172), the classics of rationalism—Descartes, Leibniz, and Wolff—all recognized the primacy of the senses in the process of cognition. Quite another matter is the origin of “necessary truths,” which are opposed to the largely casual associations of sensations and sensual images. Here, the rationalists did disagree with the empiricists. The senses never reveal the *essence* of a thing, its causes, and laws. The senses inform us how external bodies look in the “mirror” of the human body; we can learn from the senses about the usefulness or harmfulness of external things for each other and for the human. But the senses do not teach us what things are in themselves. In other words, the senses reflect only the casual and phenomenal, but never the necessary and essential.

According to Descartes, says Asmus, the necessary character to human knowledge is granted by “intellectual intuition.” If Comrade Dmitriev finds this term hostile, some poison potion of Husserl, it is owing only to his ignorance about the history of classical philosophy.

Isn’t exactly this “intellectual intuition” that was in dispute between Schelling and Hegel in the depths of classical German Idealism? It is an old term, an

old concept and an old argument. What's Husserl got to do with it? These are things very well known in the history of philosophy, and there is nothing to frighten me with bugaboos, saying that anyone who discusses—in a *historical* work!—"intellectual intuition" is a Husserlian. (Prentia 1928, p. 172)

Equally, only Dmitriev's blissful ignorance of linguistics leads him to consider "grapheme" and "morpheme" as Husserlian terms (perhaps Dmitriev concluded this by analogy with "noema").

Descartes is hailed as the "father of modern idealism," for his *cogito* is interpreted as an assertion of the primacy of consciousness over being. The militant materialists often look at Descartes as a class enemy. Asmus tries to interpret the *cogito* as a purely methodological postulate that does not correspond to the real order of nature.

Descartes teaches on the primacy of consciousness not in the order of *being*, but only in the order of its *cognition*. For a person, who starts cognition, who first sets his eyes on the world around him, where everything flows, moves, changes, slips away, the "closest" thing, always present as it is, is the very act of consciousness directed at the object. (Asmus 1928, p. 119)

Descartes's idealism is *methodological*, nothing more. Descartes does not accept the "ontological" primacy of consciousness over being, unlike the real, unmixed idealists.

The apology suggested by Asmus does not sound very convincing. In the Third Meditation Descartes declares that in the order of cognition "my perception of God is prior to my perception of myself" (Descartes 2006, p. 25). Additionally, in the order of being, the *existence* of God precedes my "self," or the finite "thinking thing" (*res cogitans*).

Asmus could not have been unaware that Descartes believed God to be the origin of all things, including material nature. But Asmus avoids grasping this slippery item, as if Descartes's immaterial God were also a methodological postulate and not the real source of all being, including the physical movement in nature. Descartes's God is not only the creator of all things, the *omnicreator*, but also the eternal mover of the universe. In detailing Descartes's cosmology, Asmus passes over in silence the doctrine of God's permanent creation of the world, without which the machine of the world would not exist even for a second.

Asmus was fortunate that his opponents did not ask him bluntly: well, then, what in Descartes is primary *ontologically*, in the "order of being," material substance or spiritual substance? Asmus' ingenious construction of "methodological idealism" might have spectacularly collapsed before the eyes of his audience.

However, the more erudite Furshchik did not fail to note that the "methodological" interpretation of the *cogito* was discovered by Marburg neo-Kantians, long before Asmus. They just preferred to call the "purely methodological" principle otherwise—"transcendental." A special work on this subject was written by Paul Natorp.³ "Dialectic is out of the question here," Furshchik concluded. "Comrade Asmus, in my

³It seems that Furshchik was referring to Natorp's habilitation work, *Descartes' Theory of Knowledge. Studies in the Prehistory of Criticism*. It portrayed Descartes as Kant's forerunner and the *cogito* as transcendental apperception.

opinion, is deeply mistaken here, and the reason for this is that he has fallen under the direct influence of Neo-Kantianism” (Preniia 1928, p. 164).

Here, it has to be acknowledged, Furschchik “hit the nail on the head.” As a logician and historian of philosophical thought, Asmus continued the line of pre-revolutionary Russian Neo-Kantianism, although it is not easy to discern it behind a Marxist-Leninist decorum. In Asmus’s lectures, Piama Gaidenko, a student, was

struck by his ability to clearly and accessibly reveal the content and meaning of the most complex constructions of Cohen, Natorp, Cassirer, to show the logical ties between their concepts, and, most importantly, to let us see what real ... questions of logic and theory of cognition these thinkers solved, relying on Kant, but at the same time rethinking his teaching in the light of the latest discoveries in mathematics and physics. (Gaidenko 2001, p. 78)

No doubt, Neo-Kantian training is evident in Asmus’s reading of Descartes. However, Furschchik is mistaken to excommunicate the *cogito* from dialectics. He should at least take into account the opinion of Hegel, who saw in the formula “I think therefore I am” a unity of opposites, namely a unity of thinking and being, even if given only as “the form of a representation (*die Gestalt einer Vorstellung*) which I possess within me” (Hegel 1986, p. 141).

Asmus, however, did not find dialectics in the principle of *cogito* either. Starting to talk about Descartes’s dialectical ideas, Asmus stipulates that these ideas do not grow out of *cogito* or metaphysical principles but “out of Descartes’s *special scientific* studies, as their logical awareness and completion” (Asmus 1928, p. 124). The lecture highlights the dialectical principle of “systematic knowledge” and the idea of development in Descartes’s cosmology.

Asmus demonstrates how from the metaphysical identification of matter with spatial extension, Descartes derives innovative theses on the infinity of the world and on the unity of matter. The medieval—“amiable to theology”—doctrines of hierarchy of the universe, of the qualitative difference between the earthly and the celestial, are discarded. What is left is a simple motion of matter in a homogeneous three-dimensional space. The denial of emptiness led to the affirmation of universal interaction, the interconnection of everything with everything else.

The crystal stellar sphere, shattered by Descartes, could never again close around the earth. ... The dialectical content of this teaching consisted in the fact that it led directly to the idea of *interaction, mutual connection* of all the elements of the material world. If the world is a single whole and the matter of which it is made is the same everywhere, then no event taking place in any part of the world can remain isolated and indifferent to the world as a whole. Every *motion* of the body must be seen as a *relative* motion. (Asmus 1928, pp. 136–137)

Of course, Asmus specifies, Descartes was talking about *mechanical* motion and interaction. But this concept of the simplest form of motion was necessarily the starting point and first step in ascending to a concrete, consistently dialectical view of the world. And the real breakthrough into dialectics was the doctrine of universal evolution. None other than Descartes became the first modern thinker to introduce the idea of evolution into cosmology.

Descartes's cosmology is at the same time *cosmogony*. Its aim is to understand not only the structure of the world in its present form, but also its *origin*, its *development* from the primary elements. Long before Kant and Laplace, Descartes came to the conclusion that a theory of the physical structure of the world is incomplete and even inconceivable without its *history*. (Asmus 1928, p. 141)

The book

In the early years of the “Thaw,” Asmus wrote a monograph entitled simply *Descartes*. The book was submitted to the printer in February 1956, almost simultaneously with Khrushchev's speech at the 20th CPSU Congress “On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences.” Asmus's intellectual biography of Descartes is addressed not only to philosophers and people of science: it is written so that it can be read as well by high school students, yet it is equipped with a cumbersome reference apparatus—60 pages in brevier type with notes and references to sources in five languages.

The book features half a dozen reproductions from French librarians, including two portraits of Descartes.⁴ The publication of this book certainly contributed to Asmus's being elected a full member of the International Institute of Philosophy in Paris in 1958. In the same year, the book came out in Hungarian and Romanian translations, and later in Polish. Nevertheless, the author was strictly forbidden to go abroad, even to the countries of “people's democracy.” Asmus had to decline all invitations, citing ill health and life circumstances.

In writing *Descartes*, Asmus took full advantage of the warming ideological climate in the Soviet Union. Descartes no longer needed to be apologized for: it was enough to mention his “materialist tendencies” here and there.

There is not any discussion of dialectics in this book, except for a single reference to Engels, who regarded the concept of variable quantity introduced in Descartes's *Geometry* as “the basis for characterizing Descartes, in this point, as a dialectically thinking scientist” (Asmus 1956, p. 151). However, a few pages later, Asmus himself reproaches Descartes for “*not having a command of dialectics*, he reduced all sensory properties of things to purely subjective phenomena of perception” (ibid., p. 168; italics added). Asmus does not explain what dialectics advises to do with sensory properties. Besides, it remains unclear why he concludes that Descartes regarded all sensory properties to be “purely subjective,” especially when it comes to the spatial and geometrical properties of perceptible things.

There were nearly thirty years between Asmus's lecture on Descartes's dialectic and his book *Descartes*. One might conjecture that Asmus had changed his views: initially, he considered Descartes a dialectician; on mature reflection, however, Asmus corrected his mistake: Descartes did not have a command of dialectics. Nevertheless, Asmus included, without changes, the chapter “Dialectics in Descartes's System” in

⁴“Valentin Ferdinandovich gladly showed them to students and was sincerely disappointed when, through the fault of the printers, the portrait of his favorite philosopher was poor in the published book” (Blok and Fedosova 2001, p. 129).

the second volume of his *Selected Philosophical Works* (Asmus 1971). We have no satisfactory explanation for this antinomy. Perhaps, Asmus himself simply did not notice it.

The author of *Descartes* does not address the most burning problems in contemporary Descartes studies. There is neither a word about the “Cartesian Circle,” nor mention of the celebrated controversy on Descartes between the structuralist Martial Gu  roult and the historicist Ferdinand Alqu  . Asmus’s historical and philosophical analysis is not very deep. But in Soviet literature there was no work on Descartes of comparable quality, nor to this day of the breadth of coverage of Descartes’s scientific work.

Asmus expertly discusses Descartes’s natural-scientific and mathematical treatises, as well as the controversy surrounding his discoveries and some erroneous views. Asmus himself was interested in astronomy, and he received permission from the grandees to purchase a home telescope, with Zeiss optics, abroad (the issue was resolved at the level of Molotov, the then Chairman of *Sovnarkom* government).

In the monograph on Descartes, of course, one could no longer remain silent about god (as a matter of principle in the Soviet Union the word was spelled with a lower case *g*). One had to decide what to do with Descartes’s concept of God. Should the philosopher be condemned for having turned to this religious notion, or maybe justified, as Asmus had done earlier in the case of Spinoza?

If that is one’s objective, it is not difficult to find logical or historical reasons to justify Descartes. Indeed, in the Sixth Meditation, there is a formula to which Spinoza would surely have subscribed:

By “nature,” taken generally, I understand nothing other than God himself or the ordered network of created things which was instituted by God. (Descartes 2006, p. 45)⁵

This definition is, in effect, not so far from *Deus sive Natura*. From a religious point of view,   tienne Gilson had every reason to call Descartes’ God “stillborn.”⁶ This God is as little in need of human faith, praise, and prayer as some triangle or piece of wax (examples from *Meditations*). Unlike the biblical Jehovah, his God has no anger, no joy, and no affects at all. According to Descartes, affect arises from the interaction of the soul with the body, but his God has no body.

Vasily Sokolov, in his introductory article to Descartes’s *Selected Works*, found his God “very peculiar”—devoid of anthropomorphic features and acting as “guarantor of determinism” (Sokolov 1950, pp. 41–42). In other words, God himself guarantees the impossibility of miracles that violate the laws of nature.

Nevertheless, Asmus does not hesitate to regard Descartes’s proof of the existence of God “as a remnant of religiosity undefeated by scientific thinking.” Hence this unflattering verdict:

⁵“Per naturam enim, generaliter spectatam, nihil nunc aliud quam vel Deum, ipsum, vel rerum creaturarum coordinationem a Deo institutam intelligo” (Descartes 1904, p. 80). Spinoza calls God himself *natura naturans*, and referred to the ordered network of created things as *natura naturata*.

⁶“Even as a philosophical supreme cause, the God of Descartes was a stillborn God. He could not possibly live because, as Descartes had conceived him, he was the God of Christianity reduced to the condition of philosophical principle, in short, an infelicitous hybrid of religious faith and of rational thought” (Gilson 1941, p. 89).

In the philosophical grounding of his physics, Descartes is a clear idealist, attempting to combine philosophy with some of the doctrines of theologians. This combination clearly appears in Descartes's attempt to prove the existence of God. (Asmus 1956, pp. 92–93)

Apparently, Asmus feels that Descartes no longer requires a defense and gives free rein to his Kantian instincts, attacking “the imaginary Cartesian proof of the existence of God” (ibid., p. 94). Without mentioning the name of the Königsberg “reactionary,” Asmus lucidly retells the famous “critical” objection to the “ontological” proof, concluding his argument with the following flawlessly Kantian passage:

In itself this concept [of God], as a *concept*, does not at all guarantee that the object of this concept exists. From the mere content of this concept, i.e. from the attributes that are in our mind, we can in no way deduce the existence of that [object] to which these attributes are mentally ascribed. The assertion that something exists cannot be deduced from a mere logical analysis of the concept. Such assertion can only be substantiated by experience. (Asmus 1956, p. 94)

At heart, Asmus hardly considered “undefeated religiosity” or “clear idealism” as vices. He himself was a religious man and had brought up his children in Orthodox faith; his eldest son became a priest.⁷ And for a good half of his life Asmus lived with the label “idealist”—and not simple idealist, but “menshevizing” (this poisonous predicate was invented by Stalin himself to characterize Deborin's group).

So religiosity and idealism get Asmus closer to Descartes. Margarita Dmitrieva, who listened to “his fascinating lectures on Descartes' rationalism,” testifies that Asmus “somehow felt very personal about him, loved him as a thinker” (Dmitrieva 2001, p. 110).

These lectures were part of the course “History of the Early Modern Logic,” which Asmus gave at MSU. Nine transcripts of the 1952 lectures were published not so long ago (Asmus 2007). Three lectures deal with Descartes's method of cognition, including his criticism against scholastic “dialectics,” teaching of the “boundaries of mind,” and his theory of innate ideas. The rest of Asmus's works mention Descartes only in passing, mostly when dealing with problems in the theory of cognition.

In his review of *Descartes*, Sokolov rightly points out that the author of the book introduces the Soviet reader to the contents of several of Descartes's most important texts, including *Objections* by “some learned men” (materialists Hobbes and Gassendi among them) and *Answers* by the author of *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Sokolov 1958, p. 128). The Russian translation of these texts would not see the light of day until almost forty years later, in 1994, when neither Asmus nor the USSR existed.

Freedom of thought

Asmus's *Essays on the History of Dialectics in Modern Philosophy*, which began with a paper on “Dialectics in Descartes's System,” fell into the hands of N.A. Berdyaev,

⁷Valentin Valentinovich Asmus (born 1950), now mitered archpriest, teaches at the Moscow Theological Academy.

then living in exile in Paris. In a review, Berdyaev regarded Asmus's book as "an indicator of the existence of philosophical thought in Soviet Russia," but added that its author

has no real freedom. It is painful to read him speak with pathos about Descartes's constriction of freedom of thought. He himself, like Descartes, would need to go to 'Holland' to find freedom of thought. (Berdyaev 1931, p. 109)

The lines of Aleksei Losev's letter to Asmus (28 September 1973) are saturated with longing for freedom:

We have not done what we wanted to do, what we were born to do and what we were sufficiently prepared for. Our printed works pale before this, although they were many. (Losev 2001, p. 280)

In recent years, publications have appeared by authors who recall Asmus's ideologically colored criticism of the arrested Losev and recently deceased poet Andrei Bely (Korsakov 2018; Petrov 2018). Indeed, a month after Losev's arrest, Asmus issued a condemnation of his works—apparently to avoid ending up in the next prison cell. Asmus was not the bravest of men. He used to communicate secretly with Losev, discussing his religious ideas with sympathy, and this fact could easily have come up during the investigation. By that time a campaign to persecute the "menshevizing idealists" had already begun. Sensing the scent of blood all around, everyone saved themselves as best they could.

Losev was well aware of this and saw Asmus as an associate "in the tedious and endless struggle with the surrounding spiritual beast" (Losev 2001, pp. 281–282). It is difficult to say why Sergey Korsakov, a recognized expert on the history of early Soviet philosophy, would not consider it necessary to mention Losev's letters to Asmus. The leitmotif of these letters is the affinity of minds and destinies of the last Mohicans of the Russian Silver Age culture. Losev unites himself and Asmus into one "we" and "us," expressing "transcendental gratitude and transfinite appreciation" to Asmus (Losev 2001, p. 282).

Of course, Asmus was not the only nor the brightest "indicator of the existence of philosophical thought in Soviet Russia" (Berdyaev 1931, p. 108). But he was in the public eye: he taught in the best universities of Moscow and published a lot. The academic careers of the above mentioned Losev and Lifshits were not successful; both were denied the opportunity of publishing at the height of their powers until the end of the Stalin era. Asmus was more fortunate, although he also suffered enough from the "spiritual beast" that prowled around. A German by birth, Asmus dared to defend the classical German philosophy during the Great Patriotic War with Germany; he was the first to speak at the funeral of his disgraced friend Boris Pasternak and stoically endured the consequences of all his daring actions.

Conclusion

The fate of Asmus evokes the fate of Russian artists who were forced to become "socialist realists." Pyotr Konchalovsky, for example, who was known for his avant-garde paintings, became an uncompromising realist after the October Revolution. He

is said to have refused to paint a portrait of Stalin from a photograph, claiming that he was a realist and painted only from life.

According to Boris Groys, socialist realism legitimized “artistic appropriation.”⁸ Asmus was a virtuoso of *philosophical appropriation*. His portraits of Descartes (as we have seen, the portraits from 1927 and 1956 differ considerably) are done in the technique of *histmat*, according to the canon of Marxist-Leninist ideology, but the task that Asmus undertook—with a kind of infinite patience and scrupulousness—was to rescue Descartes’s philosophical heritage from the ideological guillotine.

Berdyayev remarks that “Asmus’s book, not at all bad, revealing philosophical abilities, makes a painful impression by mixing two styles, freely philosophical and sovietyly stale” (Berdyayev 1931, p. 109). This is how an avant-garde artist views the painting of his colleague who is socialist realist. He notices only “styles,” the superficial layer of the other’s work. The avant-garde freedom of negation, the spirit of philosophical creation *ex nihilo*, does not allow Berdyayev to see and appreciate what Herzen, in his argument with the radical Bakunin, called the “storing force” (*sila khranitel’naya*). It was this force that propelled Asmus’s pen. “When the old rots and decays, that force emerges on the scene as the destruction of destruction itself” (Lifshits 1985, p. 91).

Asmus was not a first-rate philosopher, and today few people are mesmerized by reading his *Descartes*. His contribution is that Descartes’s thought continued shining to us in the twilight of history. Asmus became a guardian of the light of reason and performed this task better than most.

Funding Maksim Maidansky’s work on this article was supported by the Russian Science Foundation under grant No. 19-18-00100.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

References

- Asmus, Valentin F. 1919. O velikom plenennii russkoĭ kul’tury [On the great captivity of Russian culture]. *Zhizn’* 2(September 8–14, 1919): 4–8.
- Asmus, Valentin F. 1924. *Dialekticheskiĭ materializm i logika: Ocherk razvitiia dialekticheskogo metoda v noveĭsheĭ filosofii ot Kanta do Lenina* [Dialectical materialism and logic: An essay of dialectic method development in modern philosophy from Kant to Lenin]. Kiev: Sorabkop.
- Asmus, Valentin F. 1926. Po povodu knigi A. Varjasha “Istoriia novoĭ filosofii,” t. I, Ratsionalisticheskiĭ materializm i idealizm, GIZ, (1926) [Concerning the book by A. Varjas, “The history of modern philosophy,” Vol. 1, Rationalistic materialism and idealism, GIZ, 1926)]. *Pod znamenem marksizma* 7–8: 206–225.

⁸“For the avant-garde, appropriation equals plagiarism. From the avant-garde artist’s perspective, articulating a vision of the future with words and images taken from the past means infecting that future with the legacy of the past. In the context of socialist realism, appropriation is seen as a legitimate artistic practice” (Groys 2013, pp. 14–15).

- Asmus, Valentin F. 1927. Dialektika neobkhodimosti i svobody v etike Spinozy [The dialectics of necessity and freedom in Spinoza's Ethics]. *Pod znamenem marksizma* 2–3: 22–55.
- Asmus, Valentin F. 1928. Dialektika v sisteme Dekarta [Dialectics in Descartes's system]. *Vestnik Kommunisticheskoi Akademii* 25: 116–145.
- Asmus, Valentin F. 1929. *Ocherki istorii dialektiki v novoi filosofii* [Essays on the history of dialectics in the modern philosophy]. Leningrad: Gosizdat.
- Asmus, Valentin F. 1956. *Descartes*. Moscow: Gospolitizdat.
- Asmus, Valentin F. 1971. *Izbrannye filosofskie trudy* [Selected philosophical works], Vol. 2. Moscow: Moscow State University Press.
- Asmus, Valentin F. 2007. *Lektsii po istorii logiki: Avicenna, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Pascal* [Lectures on the History of Logic: Avicenna, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Pascal]. Moscow: URSS.
- Berdyayev, Nikolai A. 1931. Asmus. Ocherki istorii dialektiki v novoi filosofii [Asmus. Essays on the history of dialectics in the modern philosophy]. *Put'* 27: 108–112.
- Blok, Alla M., and Alisa L. Fedosova. 2001. Reminiscences. In *Vspominaia V.F. Asmusa... [In memoriam V.F. Asmus]*, 127–129. Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia.
- Descartes, René. 1904. *Meditationes de prima philosophia*. Vol. 7 of *Œuvres de Descartes* in 12 vols. Paris: L. Cerf.
- Descartes, René. 2006. *Meditations, objections, and replies*. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company. Ed. and transl. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress.
- Dmitrieva, Margarita S. 2001. Reminiscences. In *Vspominaia V.F. Asmusa... [In memoriam V.F. Asmus]*, 108–112. Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia.
- Gaidenko, Piama P. 2001. Reminiscences. In *Vspominaia V.F. Asmusa... [In memoriam V.F. Asmus]*, 78–83. Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia.
- Gilson, Étienne. 1941. *God and philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press.
- Groys, Boris. 2013. *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*. Moscow: Ad Marginem Press.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1986. Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie. In *Hegels Werke* in 20 Bde., Bd. 20. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Korovikov, Valentin I. 1990. Nachalo i pervyi pogrom [The beginning and the first pogrom]. *Voprosy Filosofii* 2: 65–68.
- Korsakov, Sergei N. 2018. V.F. Asmus: korrektivy k obrazu [V.F. Asmus: adjustments to the image]. *Intellektual'nye traditsii v proshlom i nastoiashchem* 4: 391–414.
- Lenin, Vladimir I. 1969. Filosofskie tetradi [Philosophical notebooks]. In *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii [Complete works]* (55 Volumes), ed. V. I. Lenin. Vol. 29. Moscow: Politizdat.
- Lenin, Vladimir I. 1986. *Materializm i empiriokrititsizm. Kriticheskie zametki ob odnoi reaktionnoi filosofii* [Materialism and Empirio-criticism. Critical comments on a reactionary philosophy]. Moscow: Politizdat.
- Lifshits, Mikhail A. 1985. *V mire estetiki: Stat'i 1969–1981 gg.* [In the World of Aesthetics: Articles of 1969–1981]. Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo.
- Losev, Aleksei F. 2001. Pis'ma V.F. Asmusu. In *Vspominaia V.F. Asmusa... [In memoriam V.F. Asmus]*, 279–282. Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia.
- Motroshilova, Nelli V. 2001. Reminiscences. In *Vspominaia V.F. Asmusa... [In memoriam V.F. Asmus]*, 51–57. Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia.
- Petrov, Valeriy V. 2018. V.F. Asmus i Andrei Bely v 1936 godu [V.F. Asmus and Andrei Bely in 1936]. *Intellektual'nye traditsii v proshlom i nastoiashchem* 4: 415–452.
- Preniia. 1928. Preniia po dokladu tov. V.F. Asmusa [Discussion on the lecture of Comrade V.F. Asmus]. *Vestnik Kommunisticheskoi Akademii* 25: 145–182.
- Smirnov, Vladimir A. 2001. Reminiscences. In *Vspominaia V.F. Asmusa... [In memoriam V.F. Asmus]*, 51–57. Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia.
- Sokolov, Vasily V. 1950. *Filosofia René Descarta* [Philosophy of René Descartes]. In *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* [Selected works], ed. R. Descartes, 5–76. Moscow: Gospolitizdat.
- Sokolov, Vasily V. 1958. Obraz velikogo myslitelia (retsenziia na knigu V.F. Asmusa "Descartes") [The image of the great thinker (Review on book of V.F. Asmus "Descartes")]. *Voprosy Filosofii* 1: 125–128.
- Spinoza, Benedict. 1985. *The collected works of Spinoza*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Ed. and transl. Edwin Curley.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.