



# Vladimir Bibikhin's Philosophy

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## *Vladimir Bibikhin's Ontological Hermeneutics*

This article examines Vladimir Bibikhin's recently published series of lectures, *Property. Philosophy of the Self*, which he delivered at Moscow's Lomonosov University in 1993–1994. In it, he creatively develops Heidegger's project of "phenomenological destruction": a critical analysis of the traditional arsenal of classical ontology and modern European philosophy (substantialism and subjectivism) guided by the question of being and working through a new reading of classical thought (*Alcibiades I*). The command "Know thyself" demands we address the question of *one's own* selfhood, that which is proper to the self—a direct a priori given of human existence. In Bibikhin's definition of "one's own," primary importance is allotted not to the "private self" (with its engagement with inner worldly things), but to the relationship with the whole world, out of which the emergence of the subject is made possible for the first time. The article analyzes the original interpretations of concepts Bibikhin puts forth in his philosophy, such as "property," "world," and "capture".

### **Keywords**

Bibikhin, Heidegger, ontological hermeneutics, property, selfhood

## Vladimir Bibikhin's Ontological Hermeneutics

"In the invitation 'Recognize thyself' we hear a challenge, a summons to understand that we are not such creatures as would be capable of making themselves the object of knowledge."

*Vladimir Bibikhin. From the lecture course "Property"*

## Introduction

The student of Vladimir Bibikhin's oeuvre encounters one fundamental difficulty, inherent in the structure of his texts. Bibikhin's thought develops using a decidedly unmethodical and non-analytical approach, which is not merely a result of the lecture format in which it is presented. Rather than presenting the listener/reader with schemes, classifications, definitions, etc., these lectures offer a new and venturesome attempt to read canonical texts, a persistent focus on *interesting* and difficult themes (on Bibikhin's reading of "interest" as *inter-est*, see below), a movement back and forth between the particular and the general, and, finally, a constant shift of optics or change of aspect à la Wittgenstein. The most visible and commonly used concepts are, in fact, the least obvious, and for that reason they always constitute new discoveries. Above all, Bibikhin's phenomenologico-hermeneutic orientation demands, hermeneutic exertion from the reader. In turn, this exertion, can take place only through 1) following the text itself, turning away from any external slogans or schemata; and 2) fascination with the object of thought itself, or, in Bibikhin's own words, "capture" (*zakhvachennost*) and "openness."

## Phenomenological Destruction as a "Path"

Bibikhin's work is a continuation of Heidegger's project of "phenomenological destruction," which is a critical analysis of the traditional arsenal of classical ontology and modern Continental philosophy, (substantialism and subjectivism) guided by the question of existence, and working through "a new reading altogether of archaic and ancient thought" (Bibikhin 1998: 48). In particular, the "unreliability" of such definitions of the human being as "substance," "personality," and "consciousness" lead the author to undertake an exegesis of Heraclitean fragments, the inscription "E" at Delphi, even an interpretation of a Hindu Mahavakya, the "Great Saying" *tad tvam asi* ("Thou art That") of the Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7 (Bibikhin 1998: 42–54).

The problem of the self is emphatically formulated in Bibikhin's writings as the problem of "one's own." The problem of "one's own," in turn belongs to the realm of such distinctive themes as self-recognition, world, seizing/capture (*zakhvachennost*), and property. They are revealed

as the proper object of “first philosophy.” In his course on “Property,”<sup>1</sup> which this article attempts to interpret, phenomenological destruction is implemented in an absorbing and revelatory reading of the Platonic dialogue *Alcibiades I*, where the question of what a person’s “self itself” is (a question formulated theoretically therein for the first time in the history of European ontology) brings the mind right up to the vertiginous abyss of *Docta ignorantia*.

This approach to examining the history of ontology is what Bibikhin calls “first philosophy”: “First philosophy is a simple vision, with which nothing has yet been done, a vision before any action is taken. There is no other purpose in first philosophy, nor should there be.” (Bibikhin 2012: 35). First philosophy<sup>2</sup> thus stipulates a decisive turn away from traditional metaphysics, in the sense of onto-theo-logy, toward phenomenology, in the sense of “clarifying the situation” or “paying attention.”

In Bibikhin’s lecture course, “Early Heidegger,”<sup>3</sup> he discusses the destruction of the history of ontology within its own fundamentally decisive units:

The Middle Ages bequeathed Greek ontology to modernity through Suarez and his *Disputationes metaphysicae*. The framing concepts of modernity consist of distinctly separate areas of being —the subject, the self, reason, spirit, personality, — and the mind works with these concepts, again forgetting about their roots in being. The conceptual arsenal of the ancients adapts in the light of these new framing concepts and the old concepts undergo a reevaluation and become new. We thus have several identically petrified layers of tradition. This petrification must be softened, and the obscuring layers removed. Following the guiding thread of the question of existence, we must carry out the *destruction* of the traditional arsenal of classical ontology and modern European philosophy of consciousness. This search for *metrics* (birth certificates) of basic concepts of ontology does not signify a foolish historicism, i.e.

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<sup>1</sup> The lecture course *Property. Philosophy of one’s own* (Bibikhin 2012) was delivered at Moscow State University in 1993–1994. Several fragments of it were published at different times in Russian journals and scholarly symposia (Bibikhin 1995b), (Bibikhin 1996), (Bibikhin 1997), (Bibikhin 2003b), and were also included in the book *Drugoe nachalo* [The Other Beginning] (Bibikhin 2003a).

<sup>2</sup> As is well known, Aristotle arrived at the term *πρώτη φιλοσοφία* in order to signify “contemplative study of first origins and principles,” which was later edged out by the term “metaphysics.”

<sup>3</sup> The Petersburg philosopher Aleksey Chernyakov (1955–2010) developed a similar project on the phenomenological destruction of the concept of the subject, independently of Bibikhin. I am convinced that an analysis and comparison of both paths of the phenomenologo-hermeneutic tradition’s development in Russia is a pressing interpretive task for those interested in the return of the question’s ontological formulation in the space of contemporary philosophy (See: Mikhailovsky 2012a; 2012b).

### Vladimir Bibikhin's Ontological Hermeneutics

declaring every concept a product of its epoch. Nor does destruction mean throwing the burden of the ontological tradition from one's shoulders, lightening the load. Destruction does not wipe out the past, which is fixed forever in events; destruction is rather concerned with today, with the widespread approach to dealing with the history of ontology, in its three main forms, doxographical, ecclesiastical-historical (or humanistic, when philosophy is examined in the general context of cultural history as the history of the human spirit), and problematic-historical (when the history of philosophy is seen as various attempts to resolve eternal philosophical problems)" (Bibikhin 2009: 273–274).

Although the word *ontotheology* is not part of Bibikhin's lexicon, the passage cited clearly relates to Heidegger's idea of overcoming metaphysics, understood as the exposure of its onto-theo-logical construction through hermeneutic examination of its foundational premises. In *Identity and Difference* (Heidegger 1957) Heidegger traces precisely the paradigm of onto-theo-logy in the *Metaphysical Disputations* of the late scholastic author Francisco Suarez. If metaphysics thinks existence,  $\delta\upsilon$ , in relation to God,  $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ , by means of  $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ , the foray beyond the boundaries of metaphysics helps to overcome the rationalistic understanding of God as a principle.

Debunking onto-theo-logy's pretensions to objective-scientific authority over the transcendent is undoubtedly one of the signature features of phenomenologically-oriented philosophy after Heidegger. It has surfaced with particular prominence in the French "religious phenomenology" of Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry. And though this development is also not an explicit point of reference for Bibikhin's thought, still, Bibikhin has the resistance to the intentional model of the subject (in the spirit of Husserl), and the invocation of the fact of a "givenness" or "affectedness" of Dasein both by the Other and by oneself (that would precede experience), in common with the "theological turn." It is important to emphasize that the God of onto-theo-logy is "an idol, that which is presented by the Being of beings thought metaphysically" (Marion 2009: 18). It emerges not only as the correlative of philosophy *qua* classical metaphysics, but also as the "lifeless" construction of the cognitive subject that forms its underlying foundation.<sup>4</sup>

In *Identity and Difference*, the question of the onto-theo-logical nature of metaphysics is posed in a radical form: only when we have clarified what philosophy itself is can we answer the question "How does God enter into philosophy?" In fact we are dealing with three questions here:

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<sup>4</sup> Compare with this passage from Wilhelm Dilthey's *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (1883): "In the veins of the cognitive subject as constructed by Locke, Hume, and Kant, there flows not real blood, but the diluted juice of reason as naked cogitative activity" (Dilthey 2000: 274).

“How is it possible to think God?”; “What is philosophy as *philosophia perennis*?”; and “What constitutes the matter of philosophy, *die Sache* of thought?” At the same time it is obvious that God is nothing other than the matter of philosophy and that, conversely, the matter of philosophy is nothing other than its relation to God. Phenomenology’s close attention to the way phenomena appear leads to an inquiry into “How,” into the positioning of our own thought. As Anna Yampolskaya writes concerning the approach to Heideggerian problems in French religious phenomenology, “the crisis of ontotheology declared by Heidegger is the crisis of a particular form of discourse, the crisis of a certain understanding about thought, which identifies the matter of thought with logical, causal, moral or even negative discourse. Overcoming thought understood as objectifying mastery turns out to be possible only as a philosophical conversion which is preceded by a certain technology of *askesis*, a kind of technology of self” (Yampolskaya 2011: 108). Bibikhin implements this “technology” in the most direct way possible, by means of *questioning*, through whole *chains of questions*. The multitude of questions that Bibikhin’s reader encounters is not, of course, merely the philosophical coquetry of the erudite, but his readiness to surrender to the perplexity of the unknown, in other words, to prepare oneself for the coming of the Other—the one who is always more than what is available at our disposal, but we still feel is not alien to us.

The mind, having rejected the “God of the *Philosophes*,” finds itself only in proximity to the “divine God.” One should be wary of using the designation “method” for this process without having thought through the hidden intuition in the Greek word for path, μέθ-οδος. Such thinking would no longer be a method, rather a *way* (Weg). In historico-philosophical literature there is a widely popular view that after the 1930s Heidegger retreats from the project of fundamental ontology and begins to develop the conception of the “history of being” (*Seinsgeschichte*). Yet Bibikhin prefers not to notice the problem of “Heidegger I” vs. “Heidegger II.” The critique of ontotheology appropriated from late Heidegger draws support precisely from the early Heideggerian phenomenological destruction as ontological hermeneutics of Dasein. One of Bibikhin’s favorite words is not path, but *razbor*, which, for Bibikhin, translates into Russian as “deconstruction,” and means both “analysis” and “dissection.”

The approach of new thought to tasks which previous thought declared as its own, takes place in one way or another through *razbor*: both an analysis and deconstruction. To analyze (*razobrat*), as one analyzes a fine typeface and to deconstruct (*razobrat*) as something complex into its component parts—that is the one feature that renders the relationships of thought to its previous tasks and to its new one identical. The history of philosophy then becomes, in essence, the same thing as philosophy (Bibikhin 2012: 38–39).

### Vladimir Bibikhin's Ontological Hermeneutics

In connection with this, the theme of phenomenology as a way of overcoming ontotheology can be interpreted another way. A model for this kind of mental activity or *razbor* is essentially given in *apophatic* or *negative theology*, which is a style of thought typical for mysticism. Max Scheler pointed this out in his discourse on the method of epoché:

Phenomenologists, using this method (whether in our area of research or another), do not sufficiently acknowledge that at its base (as pure method) lies the method called 'negative theology.' Because the method of negative theology arose from a deep understanding of the divine and sacred as such, there is a primordial given, which can only be revealed by means of its gradual purification from the qualities attributed to it or by means of analogies with those qualities... In this sense, phenomenology as an orientation and a research method as early as the time of Plotinus became applied in the field of theology (Scheler 1921: 393–394).

Bibikhin understands phenomenology as *paying attention* to *how* what appears as this or that *appears*. Phenomenology demands theoretical open-mindedness and therefore refuses to employ ready-made theoretical templates (for example, the system of subject-object relations) or constructions in reading and interpreting philosophical texts.<sup>5</sup> This analysis (*razbor*) is governed by what the object under study itself dictates, and therefore runs in the direction of the early phenomenological appeal "*zu den Sachen selbst*." But for that purpose, the object must in some way be already given, and must be given at the pre-reflexive level. The phenomenon is understood by Bibikhin in accord with Heidegger "as that which shows itself as being and the structure of being" (Heidegger 1996: 59). I believe that the structure of this phenomenon, this disclosure, this revelation, is precisely captured in the word *epiphany*.

An epiphany occurs as possession or, in terms that follow the French religious phenomenologists, affectedness by the Other.<sup>6</sup> The work of deconstruction (*razbor*) is furthermore necessary because we are, as Bibikhin observes, "always in a situation," i.e. we are never in an empty place, but always already possessed, only we have not yet "de-constructed," "*razobrat*," what we are to the extent that we should. "We pronounce the word 'appears' and do not hear ourselves, we see the thing already as a given, when the word invites us—our own word, pronounced by us—to pay attention, to be phenomeno-logists, to speak and think about the puzzle of *appearance*" (Bibikhin 2012: 252). For Bibikhin, affectedness by the Other breaks down into the affectedness by God and the affectedness by *one's own* speech.

<sup>5</sup> Hence Heraclitism in thought and speech is not arbitrary, but essential.

<sup>6</sup> See: (Yampolskaya 2011: 109 and subsequent pages).

Aleksandr Mikhailovsky

## One's Own and the World

### One's Own as *je-meines*

Now, with the necessary “methodological” introduction behind us, the time has come to make the shift toward the concept of *one's own*. In the spirit of Heidegger's “fundamental ontology,” the human being, or selfhood, is construed as “pure presence” and “attuned understanding,” open to the world and recognizing itself therein. Philosophy, or the *philosophia perennis*, appears not simply as a scientific-theoretical activity originally discovered in Europe, but as an authentic mode of being of man; it always begins with surprise and presupposes a safeguarding of being that renders it meaningful.

The dependent and problematic nature of the construct of the self, presupposing denotation of the subject toward innerworldly things (*das innerweltliche Seiende*), is overcome in Bibikhin's work through “the human self-recognition in experience of the world.” Hence the different “self masks” turn out to be nothing other than an effect of Heidegger's *das Man* (the impersonal “people,” the crowd). “The unknown faces of being are created by my countless selves. You will say: my various selves constitute my richness, they are events, I must have so many facets (‘multifaceted personality’). The other side of this multifaceted-ness is the tough verification it calls forth: where properly am I? Perhaps my many selves are my poverty (the crowd)?” (Bibikhin 2012: 95).

Human existence, *Dasein*, is always located, that is, finds itself in relation to the world and in the process of this relation constitutes the self as one of the things *in* the world. That said, *initially, at the level of being*, *Dasein* is not the subject, just as the world is not the sum total of everything that exists, or, as Bibikhin states, not without asperity, the “dumping ground” of things and opinions. *Dasein does not belong* to some nominal self, but is nothing more than one of the moments of *Dasein* or one of its ways of relating to *the world as a whole*, albeit one of the most important. Referring to Heidegger's definition of the being of such a separate essence as “always-mine,” *je-meines*, Bibikhin notes “in the margins” of *Being and Time*: “My being is *my own*, but I myself am a moment in the unfolding of this being, a secondary formation around primary, original structures of being” (Bibikhin 2009: 300–301).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Dasein* in the Russian text of *Being and Time* is consistently translated by the Russian *prisutstvie* (“presence”). On this provocative choice of Russian translation for the chief concept in twentieth-century philosophy, see Bibikhin's translator's afterword (Heidegger 1997: 448–451).

<sup>8</sup> For clarification of the “always-mine” nature of *Dasein* and the concept of presence, and for explication of the question of *one's own*, it will be helpful for the reader to refer to the materials for the seminar on “Early Heidegger” (Bibikhin 2009).

### Vladimir Bibikhin's Ontological Hermeneutics

In sum, we are talking about separating the phenomenon of selfhood (the word "selfhood"—*samost'*—is rarely used by Bibikhin), or *one's own*, from the direct a priori (primary, initial: the literal meaning of "a priori" being "from the first") givenness of human being. The questions at the act of *razbor's* (or phenomenological destruction's) foundation are the following: "Do we have a chance, being broken up into various selves, of finding ourselves in the world? Do we find our *selves* in the world or can we find ourselves *only* in the *world* and nowhere besides in the whole world will we find ourselves? Sheer questions with no answers. And the word 'ourselves' burns us. It hints at property, our main theme. Is my self my own property? Or do we not belong to ourselves? Then to whom, or to what do we belong? To the world itself? But the world is mine, and is not each person a world?" (Bibikhin 2012: 52–53).

Answering these questions presupposes at least two things (about the world, more below): 1) drawing a boundary between what constitutes property and what does not and 2) deciding to what extent property, *Eigentlichkeit*, is nothing other than the decision to take up the burden of *Dasein*, the "always-mine" of being upon one's shoulders. "In *what is mine*," Bibikhin expounds,

in each instance of 'mine,' there is neither time nor strength for 'creativity,' for the creation of the world or something else of such splendor and beauty. And all the same: *somehow*, I don't know exactly how, I am drawn in, pulled in to the whole world, such that through me *everything* passes. I am the place of choice and decision, which do not require time, are not in time. Therefore it is not that I must make a decision *every minute*. I make a decision *in the present* (*v nastoiaschem*), concerning *the present and the real* (*nastoyaschee*) (Bibikhin 2012: 234).

Here Bibikhin moves within the hermeneutics of *Dasein* along the path set forth and fixed in *Being and Time*. The interlocking of one's own and the whole world which is carried out in the decision concerning the present (read as authentic, belonging to the self), in connection with the crucial ontological feature of *Dasein*, thematized as *Jemeinigkeit*: being each time one's own.

In *Being and Time* §9 we read: "The being whose analysis our task is, is always we ourselves. The being of this being is *always mine* [Das Sein dieses Seienden ist *je meines*]. In the being of this being it is related to its being" (Heidegger 1996: 39). In another passage (§ 45), Heidegger clarifies: "But this potentiality-of-being that is always mine is free for authenticity or inauthenticity or for a mode in which neither of these has been differentiated" ("Als je *meines* ist das *Seinkönnen* frei für Eigentlichkeit oder Uneigentlichkeit oder die modale Indifferenz beider") (Heidegger 1996: 215).

For our purposes it is important to establish the double meaning of the terms *Eigentlichkeit* (*authenticity*, also *property* and *propriety*, also

Aleksandr Mikhailovsky

*properness*, French *propriété*) and *Uneigentlichkeit* (*inauthenticity*, *non-property* and *impropriety*, French *impropriété*). Propriety, or properness, and impropriety can be understood in the strict sense of the word as ways of being an authentic (proper) or inauthentic (improper) image of what *Dasein* is, namely, openness. In the strictest sense, to be authentic, to be open, means to be seized and consumed by nothing. To be open in the improper sense means to be consumed in one way or another by that being which arises in our field of vision within openness. And to the extent that that being which arises within openness presents itself as a structural moment of openness itself, it turns out that it is impossible to remain in openness as such, i.e., a being seized by nothing. *Dasein*, “my being,” is registered by acknowledging one’s temporal limitation, but also one’s living plenitude. It is a gleam in between the nothing of origin and the nothing of exit, the openness of all collective and reconcilable life. More than that, “my being” is organized, philosophically speaking, near the boundary as such.

### **Ontological Difference: The Difference Between One’s Own and One’s Own**

The fundamental paradox of first philosophy (which, as we determined, means *clarifying the situation* and *paying attention*) is connected to the fact that it revolves around the concept of *nothing* or, more precisely, that which does not exist. Is not this interest pivoting on nothing related to the interest pivoting on the boundary, or are they one and the same? Bibikhin traces the etymology of the word “interest” to the Latin “inter est,” “is between.”<sup>9</sup> “Is between” signifies the difference, a situation to which we are not indifferent. We could further develop this thought and say that the boundary as nothing (nothing of what is), its divisive organizing principle itself, turns out to be what is probably most interesting in all being. “Interest’ appears not where there are different things, but on the contrary, when a person encounters ‘interest,’ having taken possession of him, he begins to differentiate things” (Bibikhin 2012: 36).

I claim that what Bibikhin, in his “Property” lectures, calls “the interest of first philosophy,” traces back to Heidegger’s ontological difference. In *Being and Time* Heidegger postulates ontological difference as the difference between Being (*das Sein*) and that which is (*das Seiende*). At the same time Bibikhin interprets ontological difference in a new way.

He defines the place of philosophy, as well as its applicability, in the following way: “All philosophy revolves around this riddle of the differ-

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<sup>9</sup> This explication of “interest” occurs in Heidegger (Heidegger 2006: 36); in addition, the use of “inter-esse” to mean difference and “being-between” can be found in Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard 2005: 341).

ence (interest) between one's own and one's own, proper and proper" (Bibikhin 2012: 111). Since we are talking about one's own and what I earlier called the direct a priori given of the human being, the drawing of the person into ontological difference *qua* difference between that which exists and being, unconditionally Other, will be the first and fundamental fact in the ontological structure of selfhood. The inaccessibility and impenetrability proper to the human being corresponds to that difference.

Bibikhin proposes we differentiate between the ontic meaning of one's own as mere legal belonging and the ontological meaning of one's own as what is proper. This basic difference is in a sense multiplied through a whole series of distinctions between propriety and impropriety, self-knowledge and self-recognition, etc. If first philosophy is constructed around the riddle of interest, then it inevitably is faced with the task of "distinguishing what is one's own in the sense of belonging, one's own in the sense of *property* from what is *properly* one's own, that *usually* a person bypasses what is properly his own, gets stuck in the 'one's own' of property, understood also not as what is *properly* property, but legal property" (Bibikhin 2012: 222). Thus, at its origin, the concept of property has two polar opposite meanings: property as the relationship of ownership between goods and their legal proprietor, and, by contrast, the properness of one who has returned to the *self* and become properly oneself.

### The indefinability of *one's own*

Continuous recourse to etymological analysis (*razbor*) is an indispensable condition of the path of thought. It allows us to strip away the word's faded meaning in everyday usage and remember its genuine meaning (*ety-mon*). For this purpose it is crucial to scrutinize all of its offshoots or derivations and return to its root and source. Sounding out the word begins, however, at the moment when it is heard in ontic speech, that is, in ordinary, regular usage. "We fear the limitation of the 'sphere' like the plague and want to let the word enjoy its maximal latitude, as it is heard, any which way it comes out, however it lies" (Bibikhin 2012: 184).

The Russian word *sobstvennost'*, like the Latin *proprietas* and *proprius*, and words derived from them in other modern European languages, (*property*, *propriety*, *properness*, French *propriété*), is equally capable of signifying "one's own," "a quality proper to something," and "that which is real, authentic." The Russian *svoë* maintains a link with the Sanskrit root *su-*, which meant both "one's own, native," and "benefit, good." The same root is present in the Latin *suus*: the expression *suum*, *suus esse*, literally "to be one's own," translates as "to be free." "The Russian word *svoboda* [freedom]," Bibikhin notes, "derived from *svoë*, 'one's own,' helps us to understand the Latin expression not in the sense of belonging to oneself, but in the sense of the attainment of 'one's own essence'..."

(Bibikhin 2012: 102). One's own and what is proper, that which is real and that which rightfully belongs, freedom and welfare, are bound together in a knot. "It [the word *sobstvennost'*] contains property as what is real, authentic, itself. This is not a caprice of language. Not for nothing do we detect in the word for 'property' the resonance of what is properly one's own. Property, of any kind, from the very beginning is appointed to clarify, to investigate one's own *proper* substance. What may seem vexatious ambiguity to some, a problem for the lexicographer, is in fact the mere tip of the iceberg. It is not lexical troubles that force us to pay attention to the enigmatic doubling in language of *proper* as a tautology of *one's own and vice versa*" (Bibikhin 2012: 97).

Etymological analysis is not an end in itself, and therefore does not disengage us from the problem of human selfhood, but on the contrary, helps us to search for approaches to the inaccessible. The exegesis of the command "Know thyself," and its misreading, Bibikhin observes elsewhere, "is tied to the general displacement of the meaning of *one's own* and *proper* in Indo-European languages from 'good, native, real' toward the meaning of 'private'..." (Bibikhin 1998: 45).

Private property, a Roman institution that came to Russia from the West, refers to parts of things. The word *private* and words derived from it (e.g. *privatization*) come from the same word (via Latin *privus, privo*) as the Slavic words *proch'* ("away," as in "Get away from here!") and *oprichniki*, (special troops at the time of the Russian tsar Ivan the Terrible). And again a question seizes the author: "So, before it meant private, separate, it meant that which must be utterly cut off, severed? *Otrub*—the cutoff point, *otrubnoe imen'e*—an estate with demarcated boundaries; independently from the Latin model there is a parallel Russian formation, which repeats precisely the idea, connected with that of what is private, of removal" (Bibikhin 2012: 97).

In Vladimir Dahl's dictionary the word *otrubnyi* is glossed as meaning "distinct, separate and complete in itself" and the example given is *otrubnoe imen'e*, a detached estate. This is a surprising intuition: in language, the two opposite poles of "property" are merged into one. On the one hand, cut-off, private, privative, on the other, goods separated from the village community or Russian rural commune. On the one hand, separate, on the other, complete.<sup>10</sup> The old name for the rural community, *mir* [which also means both "peace" and "world"—trans.] leads us to the vital problem.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> According to etymological dictionaries, the Russian words *osobyi* and *osob'* (corresponding approximately to the English "particular" and "individual"—as a noun—respectively) trace back to an archaic Russian cluster of words that include the verb *sobit'* ("to acquire, make one's own") the pronoun *sobe* ("to oneself"—i.e., the dative of "oneself"), and the nouns *sobina*—"property" (belonging *not* to the community but to one family) and *sobinka*—"dear one, beloved."

<sup>11</sup> Schopenhauer's words "The world, the world, asses! That's what the problem

"Private means cut off from the *mir*, that about which we in essence know nothing, not even in what sense of the word to take it... Consciousness carries out an experiment, beginning from the visionary hypothesis that what we separate into the realm of the private, elite, separate, atomized, individual, for some reason, possibly, comes to life, takes hold as something complete, full in itself, independent, that is, one whole is reborn and multiplied in the multitude of small wholes" (Bibikhin 2012: 97).<sup>12</sup>

What essential feature in the ontological organization of the world does this duplicating "property" point us toward? At the very foundation of the world is a fundamental paradox; and the merit of our "natural" language, in contrast to any "contradiction-free" theory, lies in the fact that the language allows this paradox of the world to enter into itself. "*One's own* and *one's own*—*one's own* as what is individual and only individual, legally confined as a unit—and *one's own* as familial: one's own indicates both the individual, and with the same exactitude the genus, though supposedly individual and genus are opposed to each other as concepts. In this paradox, in this enigma that which is native, as most intimate, one's own, points simultaneously to the genus, i.e., what is least intimate, opposed to the individual" (Bibikhin 2012: 184–185).<sup>13</sup>

*Svoe*, or one's own, is further revealed to be a strict philosophical term, defined above all apophatically. To positively define it is impossible due to a certain "plasticity," which is the plasticity of language itself and those who speak by means of it. The first reason why *svoe* cannot be defined is rooted in a quality inherent in language, which is its reluctance to

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of philosophy is, the world and nothing else," could be the epigraph to Bibikhin's book *The World*, whose main theme is the world as the only place and horizon of all existence and understanding (Bibikhin 1995a).

<sup>12</sup> In view of the narrowly specific task set in this article, I omit discussion of a large fragment on privatization. In 1993, as a practical philosopher, Bibikhin was preoccupied with the issue of privatization then ongoing in Russia, and sensitive to questions relating to general social concerns. For completeness it should be stated that the theme of property always occurs, in both these lectures and his later course "Philosophy of Law," when discussing problems of the state and the law. On the extremely interesting and important political implications of his meditations on property in the context of Russia, see: (Kharkhordin 2011: 313–321).

<sup>13</sup> Here, Bibikhin observes that "the Russian language's hour of triumph has not yet come for thought, nothing is stopping it from coming. Sometimes, as in this case, of *one's own* and *proper*, Russian speaks of a sudden so vastly and enigmatically, quite unlike any of the European languages recognized as languages of philosophy. And 'svoe' [one's own] and 'sobstvennyi' [proper] are, in a good sense, untranslatable into other languages..." (Bibikhin 2012: 185). For Heidegger, the German language was a substitute for Greek in this "miserable age": for example, French philosophy, in order to take shape as philosophy, must needs speak German (according to Jean Beaufret). The Russian language, according to Bibikhin, stands apart from all European languages of philosophy: it is distinguished by its vastness, generosity, and mystery.

“get bogged down in details,” its breadth and scale. Bibikhin, in his unique style, cites an example involving the death of Stalin (Bibikhin 2012: 187). The newscaster Yuri Levitan announces the death of Stalin in a radio broadcast and a man clutching the radio in his hands weeps, not knowing how to go on living or what to live for. To him, Stalin is *his own, native*, for whose sake he is ready to sacrifice *his own* life. The second reason relates to the fact that a person must take the task of defining the word upon himself.<sup>14</sup> This is where the figure of “learned ignorance” comes in, inscribed by Socrates/Plato and developed by Nicholas of Cusa. Bibikhin warns against the distortion of Plato’s interpretation, in which Socrates, by showing human ignorance of what actually drives them, demands we acquire knowledge and define the essence of things. In the light of ontological difference (the difference between *one’s own* and *one’s own*) Socrates compels us to “properly, honestly not know,” he teaches us to grow accustomed to ignorance. Hence a more exact translation of the Delphic adage of Apollo, γνῶθι σεαυτόν, would be “Recognize thyself” rather than “Know thyself.” “One’s own does not mean fencing oneself off from others and keeping inside the fence of an entire city of intellectual constructions, just as ‘Recognize thyself’ does not amount to a call to intensified self-consciousness. In the invitation ‘Recognize thyself’ we hear a challenge, a summons to understand that we are not such creatures as would be capable of making themselves the object of knowledge, unless we hear in the term *knowledge* the other, old meaning of procreation (*gnosis/genesis*). But the meaning of procreation in turn can only occur in giving birth” (Bibikhin 2012: 138).

Of vital importance for understanding the theme of *one’s own* is the analysis of *Alcibiades 1*. Bibikhin offers an extended explication of pages 128–129 of the dialogue, where the concepts of “one’s own” and “Recognize thyself” converge.<sup>15</sup>

**ALCIBIADES I, 129 a-b**

SOCRATES: And is self-knowledge such an easy thing, and was he to be lightly esteemed who inscribed the text on the temple at Delphi? Or is self-knowledge a difficult thing, which few are able to attain?

ALCIBIADES: At times I fancy, Socrates, that anybody can know himself; at other times the task appears to be very difficult.

SOCRATES: But whether easy or difficult, Alcibiades, still there is no other way; knowing what we are, we shall know how to take care of ourselves, and if we are ignorant we shall not know.

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<sup>14</sup> In *Being and Time* § 2, Heidegger discusses the fact that presence possesses the ontological possibility of asking about the meaning of its being. At the same time we do not see the horizon from which this meaning must be fixed. For presence there is only the “average and vague understanding of being” (Heidegger 1996: 4).

<sup>15</sup> Here I refer only to the lectures of 14.12.1993 and 21.12.1993.

### Vladimir Bibikhin's Ontological Hermeneutics

ALCIBIADES: That is true.

SOCRATES: Well, then, let us see in what way the self can be discovered by us; that will give us a chance of discovering our own existence, which otherwise we can never know (Jowett 1896; modified slightly by the translator).

The question of what a human being is changes to the question of what selfness is. The traditional commentaries attempt at once to connect αὐτὸ τᾠτό (the “self”) to the official Platonism: here, they claim, we should understand the general concept of the Platonic Idea or *eidōs* of the human being. Only when we know this idea as the base, generic concept of the human being can we know each concrete individual.<sup>16</sup> Bibikhin decisively sweeps away that interpretation as improper and takes an unexpected step in a different direction, citing the commentary of a Byzantine scholiast:

Recognize yourself in words—no great deed,  
In deed only a god can know it.<sup>17</sup>

The question of “one’s own” or “selfness itself” is posed, but immediately “disappears into the abyss” of the call to “know thyself itself!” The inscription in the temple is dedicated to a divinity, it is divine. “The meaning of this divine self-contemplation, no doubt, lies in the fact that God knows, and is the only one truly to know, that which is *his own*. So are we to understand that the human being neither knows that which is properly *his own*, nor will ever fully find it? Or in what is *his own*, in what is *native*, the human being is God, they are one? How do you decide this? One’s own, native—the human being and God are one?” (Bibikhin 2012: 223). And later, at the beginning of the lecture given 21.12.1993: “It is as if Socrates gets burned when from the humble ‘I do not know; I know, that I do not know,’ he moves to the attempt to know, as in 129 e: ‘What is a human being.’ In order to know, one must ‘recognize oneself.’ But it is difficult. It would be good, then, to find out what ‘the self itself’ is. But that, too, is undoubtedly very difficult; 130 d; it’s enough for us to consider each kind of selfhood. But ‘selfhood’ also is beyond our grasp; the dialogue ends with the theme of the ‘soul,’ ψυχή. He gets burned because

<sup>16</sup> The Russian translation edited by Losev is indisputably good and meets Bibikhin’s standards. For comparison, I could introduce an interpretative French translation in which *auto to auto* is translated as “l’essence immuable” (E. Chambry), i.e. “immutable essence.” In fact the English translation “the self itself” or “the same as same” better corresponds to the spirit of the original.

<sup>17</sup> Scholia in Platonem (scholia vetera) — Alc. I 129 b 1:  
τὸ γνῶθι σαυτὸν ἐν λόγοις οὐδὲν μέγα,  
ἔργῳ μόνος δὲ τοῦτ’ ἐπίσταται θεός (quoted in Cufalo 2007).

### Aleksandr Mikhailovsky

both here, and there, both in ‘the self itself’ and ‘selfness itself,’ and simply in talk of any kind of self, and in the idea of the soul, something else shows through: God” (Bibikhin 2012: 226).

Bibikhin makes a vertiginous jump, but one in fact set up, as we saw, in advance: the human being in “his own” is God! In effect, one’s own, that which is proper, in the ontological sense (αὐτὸ τᾶυτό—the business of philosophy, according to Socrates)—is no other than the divine. And from here it follows that “the soul will not become whole or itself except through merging with God; recognizing itself and recognizing God are one and the same thing.” Thus the duality in the earlier demand of philosophy, γινῶθι σαυτόν, corresponds precisely to the duality of “property.” On the one hand, it may be understood in the sense of a figural reflection of itself, on the other, it can be interpreted as recognizing one’s self in the other. Again the Other is understood as both alien to me and I myself.

### Seized by one’s own

Continuing forward on the path set by the question of one’s own, Bibikhin, using the rhetoric of *Alcibiades*, observes Socratically that

property has no meaning, until the human being asks about the self; it is ridiculous to speak of the self’s property, until we have recognized ourselves. This theme is imposed, severely—it is a gift of the situation. It forces us to ask about that self to whom property belongs (Bibikhin 2012: 236).

The origin of property is in the *seizure* or the *grip* (*zakhvachennost*). This grip (this a priori of the lifeworld of a human being) is another word for openness to the world. Precisely for this reason legal ownership of things is merely a distant derivative of property as the seizing of what is one’s own. When we spoke of seizing, simultaneously opening up the concept for interpretation and being guided by it, we worked with the presupposition that it is revealed to be itself, as opposed to being taken. Property in the sense of what is real does not only signify the negation of negation or purification from inauthenticity. It only seems that it suffices to be saved from untruth in order to arrive already at truth; in fact the reverse is true, only drawing closer toward what is real helps to figure out what real untruth and distortion are. The experience of what is proper (real) does not demand special conditions (for example, legal formulation) and finds its own way through distortion. This is known to all who have entered into what is *proper*, who only then, and not before, at the theoretical level, discover its seizing and captivating depth. The acquisition of property is propelled and fed by this grip of what is proper and it, the acquisition, is also a failure of this grip, because the unity of that possession splits apart with the splitting of the meaning of *proper*. “Do I have the right to say that we

### Vladimir Bibikhin's Ontological Hermeneutics

can be *properly* seized only by *our own* and conversely, we can meet *our own* only in real possession?" (Bibikhin 2012: 100).<sup>18</sup>

A legal owner who has not made the thing their own remains, in Hegelian terms, an "empty master." Property in the ontological sense allows one to let the thing become properly itself and to let oneself become properly oneself.<sup>19</sup> Again, property is not only an assortment of things or some other object of a contract, but above all a quality or state, when something exists as its proper self. Property as the seizure of and by one's own—this is the attribute of that "which has returned to itself and become properly itself" (Bibikhin 2012: 100; see also Bibikhin 2003: 370).

Bibikhin does not balk at the risk of moving in the direction of a political and legal analysis of property and, in part, the specifics of the Russian legal system. His lectures on the philosophy of right are most revealing in this aspect (Bibikhin 2005). The theme of property is felt most acutely when it comes to the ownership of land. Let us take the following example: we may be puzzled at why the right of a villager to cut down a tree in a neighboring forest is sometimes so much more obvious than the right of the forest service or a new owner to "clear" a section of the same forest. Or even more puzzled at the right of someone to build an iron or concrete wall around the field of a former collective farm? In light of the differentiation between one's own and one's own the following answer could be given: the villager, having grown up on this land and living in his own world, fells a tree in *his own* forest. In other words, the land becomes itself, when it is used *as land*, and not as a piece of territory from which to extract profit. Only he who has helped the thing become properly itself is capable of becoming properly himself. Property in the sense of mine, belonging to me by law, is meaningless without property in the sense of one's own, of essence.

The possession of one's own corresponds to the possession of the whole, of the world—not the world overall, but always my world. Property is only in its secondary meaning a connection between the human being and the things of the world, since it is primarily based on the fundamental

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<sup>18</sup> Then, if possession is always *one's own* and has meaning only in what is *properly one's own*, that property which we are looking for is one with being? Of course. We have broken through an open door. The ancient Greek name for being, *ousia*, has the original meaning of property, belonging. But even closer to us, there is the mutual belonging to each other of being and the late Heideggerian *event*, *Ereignis*. This word with the primary meaning of *appearance*, *discovery*, *illumination* over the course of the history of the German language incorporated within itself the verb *eignen* and one way of translating it must have been "making or becoming proper" (Bibikhin 2012: 238).

<sup>19</sup> In his "Property" course Bibikhin submits the problem of "freedom of ownership," (*Freiheit des Eigentums*) from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel anticipates Marx in posing the question of alienation and the possibility of surmounting it, to detailed examination.

### Aleksandr Mikhailovsky

understanding of the world as a whole, in which both things and the human being are revealed in their truth. But this property of the world is ambivalent, maintaining as it always does the possibility of refusing the productive use of distinct things belonging to man for the sake of the whole world.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, in defining *one's own* and *selfhood* what is of primary importance is not the "private self" (and its denotation of innerworldly things), but the *relationship to the whole world*, which first gives birth to the self. Possession, the primary and mysterious given  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\ \tau\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}$ , to which the Vedic *tad tvam* ("that itself") corresponds (Bibikhin 1998: 42–54), is, in this way, the simple a priori structure of man's being as *Dasein*.<sup>21</sup> It is precisely this given that leads to philosophical perplexity and is heard in the divine demand "Recognize thyself" (another variant translation of the Greek  $\gamma\upsilon\omega\theta\iota\ \sigma\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\nu$  is *osobstvenenie*, or the act of making or becoming proper). The given turns into a task. "*Recognize thyself, that art thou* as the yielding of a captivating understanding to a seized acceptance—this is the trajectory of history, the clarification of the world, its event" (Bibikhin 1998: 57).

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<sup>20</sup> Hence the negative meaning of "freedom of law" in Russia. For a more detailed discussion see: (Bibikhin 2005: 38, 44–46, 163).

<sup>21</sup> See "The relation 'That art thou' (or it is possible to put the accent differently: 'That art thou') is the simplest and apparently the primary structure of recognition, which seeks for itself that which could enter it by the rights proper to one side of a relationship" (Bibikhin 1998: 106).

### Vladimir Bibikhin's Ontological Hermeneutics

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