

Analysis of Kopnin's "Holistic Worldview"

Ningning Zhang

School of Philosophy, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

Email: 1541214796@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Zhang, N. N. (2026). Analysis of Kopnin's "Holistic Worldview". *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 129-138.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.148008>

Received: July 14, 2026

Accepted: August 8, 2026

Published: August 11, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The worldview constitutes a fundamental component of philosophy and serves as a crucial pillar of the Marxist philosophical revolution. There have been diverse interpretations of the understanding of the Marxist scientific worldview throughout the history of philosophical thought. Accurate comprehension of this worldview is essential for upholding and advancing Marxism. Based on a reflection on the worldview, Kopnin interprets the Marxist worldview and proposes the concept of a "holistic worldview". A holistic worldview refers to the completeness of the Marxist worldview in terms of content, system, methodology, and epistemology; it is precisely this completeness that fundamentally distinguishes the Marxist worldview from any other form of worldview. The core purpose of the holistic worldview is to elucidate the scientific unity inherent in the Marxist worldview. Through its distinctive cognitive approach, Kopnin's concept of a holistic worldview provides an effective response to perspectives on the worldview held by Soviet scholars as well as Western scholars, offering valuable insights for understanding and interpreting Marxist philosophy.

Keywords

Kopnin, Worldview, Holistic Worldview, Effects

1. Introduction

Since humanity began exploring the world, questions about its nature and formation have remained central to human thought. Through this exploration, a worldview—a cognitive framework for understanding the world's development—gradually emerged. The theological worldview dominated for an extended period, with "God" serving as the ultimate answer to life's mysteries. The bourgeois humanistic worldview marked a pivotal turning point in this evolution, shifting focus from divine to human perspectives. While possessing progressive value, it fundamentally lacked scientific rigor. Marx established a scientific worldview based on practical experience: dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Since

its formulation, Marxist worldview has been extensively studied by scholars across various philosophical schools, each interpreting it according to distinct historical and cultural contexts, resulting in diverse analytical frameworks. In Soviet academia, interpretations varied significantly: some scholars described it as a “dichotomous structure”, while others proposed a “one-general-three-specific” framework. The renowned Soviet scholar Kopnin, drawing on Marxist philosophy and integrating his own interpretation of the Marxist worldview, proposed the concept of a “holistic worldview”, which offers a novel analytical perspective for understanding Marxist philosophy; thus, it is essential to explore its core tenets.

2. Historical Reflection on Worldview

Philosophy is a theory concerning worldviews. But what exactly constitutes a worldview? How have the concept and its content evolved over time? These questions received attention within Soviet academic circles at the time, yet lacked profound reflection. By uncritically applying traditional philosophical definitions of worldview to Marxist philosophy, numerous misunderstandings arose regarding the relationship between Marxist philosophy and science. Against this backdrop, Kopnin conducted a historical critique of the prevailing definitions of worldview in Soviet academia and developed his own new interpretation of it.

The prevailing worldview in Soviet academia and its influence. According to Kopnin, worldviews have evolved along two distinct paths from their inception to the modern era: “theological-polytheistic” and “scientific-logical,” with the establishment of Marxist worldview representing the pinnacle of the latter approach (Kopnin, 1981: pp. 361-362). The Marxist worldview is grounded in human practical activities, employing scientific methods to address contemporary challenges and grasp the objective laws of the world. However, its scientific nature was not fully grasped by Soviet scholars. They interpreted worldview as a general perspective on the entire world, embedding this understanding without critical reflection within Marxist philosophy. The “Ontological” school within the Soviet “New Philosophical Movement” placed particular emphasis on philosophy as a discipline dedicated to understanding the entire world. For instance, Linganov of this school argued in his essay “On the Structure and Function of Marxist Philosophy”: “Philosophy also fulfills this task by explaining the entire world. It is precisely because of this mission that philosophy constitutes a worldview; thus, the ontological significance of Marxist philosophy cannot be denied.” (Linganov, 1957) This prevalent tendency to view worldview as a universal perspective dominated Soviet academic circles, serving as both a benchmark for evaluating debates on specific scientific issues and a tool to defend Soviet leadership positions. Disputes between different viewpoints were often framed as conflicts of worldviews; any controversy regarding particular scientific topics or opinions contrary to authoritative views were deemed scientifically unfounded and arbitrarily dismissed. This approach not only hindered scientific progress and innovation but also distorted the essential connection between Marxist philosophy and concrete scientific disciplines.

Kopnin argues that defining worldview as a general perspective on the entire world fails to align with the developmental level of modern philosophy, since the Marxist scientific worldview does not aim to construct such a comprehensive conceptual framework. He substantiates this position through three key arguments: First, applying the concept of “general perspective” to explain the Marxist scientific worldview is inappropriate; this term better describes philosophical worldviews that have not yet separated from religious contexts, whereas Marxist philosophy’s rigor and scientific nature clearly exceed what such a concept can encompass. Second, the notion of “world” itself carries inherent ambiguity; defining worldview solely through this concept renders it an empty, contentless notion. The term “world” emerged during the pre-separation era between philosophy and science, initially referring to “the reality surrounding humans.” Modern science, however, operates as a distinct discipline separate from philosophy, employing specialized terms like “universe” and “objective reality” to denote the “world” without providing a precise definition. Third, using the concept of “entirety” to define worldview is incompatible with contemporary realities. Modern science has demonstrated that no single theoretical framework can encompass the infinite totality of the world; each discipline approaches the study of the entire universe through its own unique perspective. Fourth, although the term “world” is also employed in Marxist philosophy, it refers to the “objective world” and the “subjective world” along with their interrelationship; moreover, these two worlds are merely synonymous expressions of “matter” and “consciousness.” Consequently, Kopnin argues that “the definition of a worldview as a system of views on the entire world loses its significance.” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 18)

To accurately understand the position of Marxist philosophy within various scientific knowledge systems and other forms of social consciousness, Kopnin advocates for a new definition of worldview. In his view, clarifying the objects and objectives of worldview is paramount. The object of worldview extends beyond individual human life or pure natural environments, focusing instead on the relationship between “human beings and nature.” Its objective is to address human challenges through interactions with nature. The relationship between humans and nature is complex—not every aspect of this relationship constitutes part of worldview; only specific elements of this relationship are included. First, the fundamental philosophical question is the primary issue of worldview and remains an eternal subject of philosophy. It “differentiates philosophers into materialists and idealists ” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 12); even after the demise of idealism, the relationship between matter and consciousness continues to be the core philosophical inquiry. Second, the concept of development constitutes the second key aspect of worldview: “without principles of development, one cannot establish the principle of material unity of the world.” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 15) Third, exploring universal laws of social development is essential to worldview. Without understanding these universal laws, other aspects of worldview lose their true significance, making it impossible to construct a comprehensive, general, and scientific worldview. Fourth,

humanity stands as the central element of worldview. To understand the general laws of social development, one cannot depart from humans and their practical activities. The worldview not only takes humans as its subject of study but also encompasses human social thought and ideals as its subjects of investigation. Consequently, “the worldview of modern science includes: addressing the fundamental questions of philosophy; establishing concepts of development that encompass the laws governing social progress; understanding human nature and its role in other real-world phenomena; and defining human social ideals.” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 18)

In his new interpretation of worldview, Kopnin defines its subject as the relationship between humans and nature, and regards addressing human issues as the core objective of worldview. This understanding of worldview proves valid for comprehending Marxist philosophy. Marxist philosophy differs from traditional philosophy, which seeks to identify a “first cause” for the entire world; in contrast, Marxist philosophy focuses on “the real world of its own era” (Marx & Engels, 1995: p. 220) and “restores the human world and human relationships to humanity itself.” (Marx & Engels, 1956: p. 443) In other words, Marxist philosophy turns its attention to the human world. Thus, Kopnin’s conception of worldview captures the essence of Marxist philosophy to some extent. However, interpreting Marxist philosophy as an understanding of the entire world essentially regresses it to traditional philosophy. Clearly, Kopnin’s critique of the prevailing definition of worldview within Soviet academia is well-founded.

3. What Is a “Holistic Worldview”?

Through profound reflection and reinterpretation of the worldview, Kopnin provides an interpretation of the Marxist worldview. He further introduced the concept of a “holistic worldview,” emphasizing that the Marxist worldview is characterized by completeness—precisely this completeness that distinguishes it from any other form of worldview.

In terms of content composition, Kopnin argues that the various components of the Marxist worldview interact and depend on one another, forming an organic whole. The materialist conception of history serves as “the core of the Marxist worldview” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 17) and provides the foundation for scientifically explaining fundamental philosophical issues such as the basic problem of philosophy and the concept of dialectical development. Various metaphysical approaches approach these concepts abstractly, detached from social development laws and human practical activities, thus failing to offer scientific explanations. In contrast, the Marxist worldview grounds its understanding of these fundamental issues in human practical activities and the general laws of social development, thereby providing a scientific interpretation. Within Marxist philosophy, the basic problem of philosophy “manifests itself in a mature and classical form; it determines all other aspects and integrates them into a unified whole, forming a coherent worldview.” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 14) “The concept of dialectical development

represents a logical continuation of the materialist resolution of philosophical fundamental questions while enriching the worldview with new essential elements.” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 15) The Marxist worldview embodies a scientific view of development, overcoming the incompleteness of metaphysics in addressing philosophical issues and upholding the principle of material unity of the world. Humans constitute the central focus of the Marxist worldview, which ultimately aims to resolve human-related problems. Humans are not abstract entities but individuals situated within specific social structures. Human practical activity serves as the starting point for studying objects. Humans live in a humanized world shaped by such activities; they not only transform objects but also strive to make them exist in ways that meet human needs and serve humanity. To understand human purposes, will, and ideals, and to comprehend the relationship between humans and nature, it is essential to examine human social life. In summary, according to Kopnin, the various components of the Marxist worldview are not independent or contradictory but interconnected. Each component holds a distinct position within this worldview and is intrinsically linked to the others in essential ways; none can be omitted, as they collectively form an organically unified whole.

From a systemic perspective, Kopnin argues that the Marxist worldview differs from various metaphysical systems as a richly contented and logically rigorous philosophical framework. Firstly, in revealing the laws of the objective world, the Marxist worldview employs distinct methods compared to metaphysics. Metaphysics relies on purely speculative approaches, resulting in an ontological framework fraught with mysticism that contradicts scientific principles. In contrast, the Marxist worldview is developed based on summarizing scientific achievements and grounded in humanity’s comprehensive life experiences, forming a doctrine of universal laws governing the objective world. The Marxist worldview regards integration with scientific knowledge as essential for its development; without assimilating scientific advancements, it cannot progress. Secondly, regarding the relationship between cognition and existence, the Marxist worldview diverges from metaphysics. While metaphysics attempts to abstractly study existence beyond the relationship between thought and being, pursuing general principles about the world’s origin, the Marxist worldview examines existence and all its categories through the lens of “the relationship between thought and being,” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 28) striving for objective truth about reality. Thirdly, concerning the relationship between existential laws and cognitive laws, the Marxist worldview contrasts with metaphysics: metaphysics sharply opposes these two domains, denying the objectivity of human thought content, “whereas the Marxist worldview integrates them rationally to achieve unity and coherence.” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 30) Finally, in terms of object comprehension, the Marxist worldview differs fundamentally from metaphysics. Traditional materialism acknowledges the objectivity of external objects, independent of human consciousness, yet approaches them through an intuitive lens. Idealism developed the subject’s agency toward objects, but this agency remains confined to the level of consciousness. The Marxist worldview af-

firms the objectivity of external objects not through intuitive or abstract means, “but regards them as objects of human sensory experience, material reality, and revolutionary-critical practical activity.” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 30) Consequently, the Marxist worldview understands objects not only by studying natural laws but also by examining the laws of social development and human needs. In summary, Kopnin argues that the Marxist worldview constitutes a complete philosophical system composed of logically interconnected elements, fundamentally distinct from one-sided philosophical systems such as positivism and existentialism that absolutize certain aspects. Any isolated, partial, or abstract focus on a single dimension of the Marxist worldview—without connecting it to other components—inevitably leads to its absolutization and distortion of the worldview’s essence (Wang, 1989).

From methodological and epistemological perspectives, Kopnin argues that the Marxist worldview possesses thoroughness and completeness. The Marxist worldview constitutes a fully developed scientific framework for understanding and transforming the world, serving as a universal methodology for scientific thinking. It excludes all mystical elements, objectively perceives reality, and establishes practice as the criterion for testing truth to ensure the scientific validity of its theoretical propositions. Consequently, the Marxist worldview plays a positive role as a universal method of scientific thought in comprehending and altering the world—a distinction starkly evident compared to the bourgeois worldview. Not all elements of the bourgeois worldview serve methodological functions; only certain components possess scientific validity. This is due to inherent contradictions within any form of bourgeois worldview, which undermine its scientific rigor. Moreover, the bourgeois worldview reflects solely the needs and interests of a minority—the bourgeoisie—often distorting objective realities to serve selfish agendas, thereby hindering genuine understanding of reality. This does not imply the absence of objective, positive aspects within the bourgeois worldview, but rather that such elements are frequently constrained by its negative components. Thus, it remains fundamentally an incomplete and partial worldview whose impact on understanding and transforming the world is temporary and limited. Based on this, Kopnin argues that the Marxist worldview is a unity of theory and methodology. Grounded in objective facts, it provides insights into objective laws and regards practice as the sole criterion for testing the validity of knowledge, thereby ensuring the scientific rigor of its theoretical framework. Consequently, all elements of the Marxist worldview can serve as a universal method of scientific thinking for human cognition and practice.

The “holistic worldview” proposed by Kopnin addresses several fundamental issues in Marxist philosophy and offers numerous new interpretations of these core concepts. This holistic perspective distinguishes itself from other approaches to interpreting Marxist philosophy, which include “philosophical interpretation,” “scientific interpretation,” “humanistic interpretation,” and “historical interpretation”—most of which lack thoroughness and often exhibit partiality or even er-

rors. Kopnin's holistic worldview explicitly rejects such one-sided interpretations, emphasizing instead the theoretical, logical, and methodological interdependence and indivisibility of Marxist philosophy as a system of truth. It profoundly illustrates the scientific unity inherent in Marxist philosophy.

4. Ideological Impact

By critically examining the prevailing definitions of worldview in Soviet academia, Kopnin developed his own understanding and elaboration of the concept, ultimately proposing the novel notion of a "holistic worldview." This contribution represents both an objective response to contemporary Soviet scholarly discussions on the Marxist worldview and the inevitable outcome of Kopnin's profound research into this subject. Regarding Kopnin's innovative interpretation of worldview and the construction of the "holistic worldview," we should neither adopt a fully affirmative nor a completely negative stance, but rather approach it with a dialectical perspective.

A comprehensive and dialectical analysis reveals Kopnin's new interpretation of the Marxist worldview. Academic evaluations of his understanding of worldview remain divided: some scholars argue that his view "that the entire world is not an object of philosophy but rather all sciences" (Tao, 1993) is misleading, while others fully acknowledge the validity of his approach to defining worldview objects. These scholars agree that Kopnin's critique of the Soviet-era definition of worldview—which treats the entire world as a philosophical subject—is inconsistent with modern philosophical developments. However, they note that his key argument—that the term "world" carries distinct meanings in modern science—is reasonable, yet "his subsequent conclusion denying the scientific concept of 'world' seems excessive." (Gao, 2010: p. 64). This assessment of Kopnin's worldview propositions is justified. Analysis of his critical examination of the Soviet academic definition reveals contradictions in his conceptual framework: while he maintains that a definitive, absolute scientific concept of "world" does not exist and thus rejects using this term to define worldview, he simultaneously acknowledges its relative existence—where "world" can refer to the surrounding natural environment or material realm. Ultimately, Kopnin's new definition positions worldview objects as the relationship between humans and nature, with its ultimate goal being to address human challenges through this interdependence. Here, Kopnin essentially employs the relative significance of global concepts to elucidate worldviews. The contradictions arising from Kopnin's understanding of global concepts indirectly demonstrate that the object of a worldview remains inherently oriented toward the world itself—it cannot be explained by bypassing this context. Although Kopnin's interpretation of global concepts contains contradictions, his characterization of the worldview's object as the relationship between humans and nature captures the fundamental shift in modern philosophy. Modern philosophy no longer seeks an original understanding of the entire world nor aims to become a science of sciences; instead, it shifts its focus to the human world and grounds

its development in scientific progress. It is precisely in this sense that Kopnin argues “treating the entire world as the object of a worldview is incorrect.” (Kopnin, 1982: p. 6) Kopnin’s conception of the worldview’s object is predicated on the advancements of philosophy, science, and historical development; he emphasizes that the object of a worldview consistently aligns with these developments, each of which necessitates a renewed understanding of the worldview. This perspective reflects Kopnin’s adherence to Marxist philosophical dialectics and its foundational stance. His framework provides a methodological approach to comprehending worldviews, urging us to ground our understanding in practical realities.

The “holistic worldview” effectively addressed numerous misinterpretations of Marxist philosophy within Soviet academic circles and played a positive corrective role to some extent. Firstly, Kopnin’s concept of a holistic worldview powerfully countered the erroneous tendency to fragment the scientific unity of Marxist philosophy in various forms. The then widely supported “ontological school” in Soviet philosophy divided Marxist philosophy into a “one-general-three-specific” structure: dialectical materialism as the overarching principle, with natural dialectics, historical materialism, and dialectical logic serving as three independent branches (Wan, 2023); it also prioritized understanding of nature over social and human cognition, treating objects in isolation from the subject. Kopnin’s holistic worldview clarified that Marxist philosophy does not consist of separate ontological, epistemological, or logical components but is fundamentally unified. This theory posits that humans are central to the Marxist worldview, with practical human activity serving as the starting point for understanding objects, emphasizing a subject-oriented approach. It rigorously criticized both the simplistic division of Marxist philosophical structures by the ontological school and its metaphysical emphasis on “intuitive abstraction” in object comprehension. Additionally, there was a prevailing tendency within Soviet philosophy at the time to enrich Marxist philosophy with neo-positivism, existentialism, Christianity, or to advocate multiple variants of the Marxist worldview. The “holistic worldview” redefines the unity of Marxist philosophy by offering a new interpretation of its fundamental principles. It rejects both the arbitrary separation of its constituent elements and the indiscriminate incorporation of content from other worldviews, as such practices would undermine its scientific coherence. This approach effectively counters attempts to fragment Marxist philosophy in various forms. Secondly, Kopnin’s holistic worldview provides a robust response to the Stalinist “propagation theory,” which profoundly influenced Soviet Marxist philosophy textbooks during his era and became a focal point of criticism due to its inherent flaws (Xu, 2023). The concept further clarifies the central role of historical materialism within Marxist philosophy, emphasizing that dialectical materialism emerges precisely from the integration of materialism and dialectics—a development that fundamentally challenges the Stalinist “dichotomy.” Thirdly, Kopnin’s framework delineates the relationship between Marxist philosophy and science. At the time, Soviet academia often treated natural sciences simplistically and mechanically due

to the dogmatic application of Marxist philosophy, a practice Kopnin strongly opposed. His holistic worldview demonstrates that Marxist philosophy is not merely a scientific discipline or a measure of science, but rather one that evolves through scientific knowledge and provides guidance by summarizing objective laws as universal methods of scientific thinking. This corrected the distortions regarding the relationship between philosophy and science prevalent in Soviet academic circles at the time. Fourthly, Kopnin's "holistic worldview" exerted a positive influence on the development of Soviet philosophy. It secured epistemology its rightful place within the Marxist worldview. Moreover, his holistic worldview was among the first to address human issues, playing a crucial role in facilitating the subsequent shift of Soviet philosophy from ontology to epistemology and fostering comprehensive exploration of human concerns.

5. Conclusion

Kopnin's "holistic worldview" is ultimately a product of the interaction between theory and practice. Through its distinctive cognitive approach, it has effectively addressed the perspectives on worldview held by Soviet scholars and Western academics within certain domains and to a certain extent. Its mode of expression, method of argumentation, and theoretical stance all reflect the specific context and characteristics of its time, offering significant insights that provide valuable reference for understanding Marxist philosophy. However, constrained by its own theoretical framework and the limitations of its era, the "holistic worldview" cannot fully and accurately represent the complete picture of the Marxist worldview; this requires an objective assessment.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Gao, Q. H. (2010). *Philosophy and the Subject's Self-Consciousness*. China Renmin University Press. (In Chinese)
<https://vufind.library.sh.cn/Record/a086c70f-5f94-4b4e-b375-12bde1431d29>
- Kopnin, P. V. (1981). *Dialectics, Logic, Science* (Wang, T.H., Trans.). East China Normal University Press. (In Chinese)
<https://vufind.library.sh.cn/Record/36eda5e2-89d1-4c71-9e68-e824025640a7>
- Kopnin, P. V. (1982). *Introduction to Marxist Epistemology* (Ma, X. and Zhang, Y., Trans.). Qiushi Publishing House.
- Linganov, P. (1957). On the Structure and Functions of Marxist Philosophy. *Journal of Leningrad University*, 11.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1956). *On the Jewish Question*. People's Publishing House.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1995). *Kölnische Zeitung*, No. 179. People's Publishing House.
- Tao, F. Y. (1993). The Concept of "World" in Philosophy. *Jianghuai Forum*, 4, 46-52. (In Chinese) <https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.16064/j.cnki.cn34-1003/g0.1993.04.009>
- Wan, C. S. (2023). Kopnin: The Pioneer of Soviet Scientific Epistemology and Logic of Sci-

ence. *Studies in Dialectics of Nature*, 7, 110-115. (In Chinese)

<https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.19484/j.cnki.1000-8934.2023.07.009>

Wang, G. F. (1989). Kopnin on the Identity of Dialectics, Epistemology, and Logic. *Journal of Fujian Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2, 12-18. (In Chinese) <https://wap.cnki.net/touch/web/Journal/Article/FJSX198902002.html>

Xu, H. B. (2023). An Important Attempt to Transcend the Soviet “Orthodoxy”: An Analysis of Kopnin’s View of Historical Materialism. *Journal of Nanjing Municipal Party School*, 4, 48-53. (In Chinese) <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-1071.2023.04.009>