

Understanding Vygotsky's Non-Classical Metapsychology

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One of the problems in understanding Vygotsky's psychology/philosophy is the fact that there is no single definition of the entire Vygotskian model. Cultural-historical theory is more than psychology, hence it is referred to as a *metapsychology*. A danger is posed when placing diverging aspects of this theory into various disciplines, all of which can ultimately lead to reductionism. As a result, cultural-historical theory has not been established within much of the institutionalized framework in university programs. Cultural-historical theory must represent new and often *underdefined* philosophical concepts that are needed to change individuals and society, such as subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Simultaneously, this understanding of newness does not diminish the need to adapt Vygotskian principles within existing Cartesian (primarily Western) structures, as that path is also necessary in making institutional inroads that help to humanize theories of psychology. Vygotskian cultural-historical theory is also viewed as a metatheory, meaning that it has reached a level of synthesis; however, it does not mean that it is metaphysical. A requirement of this approach is that each person must adapt this theory individually, with needed individual changes first required to then transform society. This framework differs from older philosophically foundationalist (i.e., monolithic), vertical structures, and also varies from postmodern fragmentation. Cultural-historical theory ultimately returns the holographic concept of the human *psyche* to a more extended view of *psychology*.¹ Another problem facing the interpretation of cultural-historical theory is the fact that many contemporary scholars in this tradition do not combine theory with actual practice, which was a prerequisite for Vygotsky. Dialectical theory relates to practice, with practice then expanding and enriching theory, resulting in a true balance within cultural-historical theory. As well, there was a constant focus on establishing theories within *defectology*, many of which are also applicable to general psychology. Vygotsky's genius can be found in the profound understanding of how *parts* relate to the *whole*, while simultaneously comprehending the *whole* as a dynamic principle that also

depends on *parts* for its growth, be it world order, societal growth, or human development. It is the constant dynamic and asymmetrical interaction of the dialectic (i.e., convergence of opposites used in forming a synthesis, which is never static but always changing), related to more absolute values, i.e., Spinozian and Marxian values that had meaning for Vygotsky.

The ultimate goal of cultural-historical theory in the West is not for Vygotskian theory to be totally integrated into mainstream psychology, or to be canonized in textbooks. The ultimate goal is to present an unfinished, living idea of how we can embrace change (both personal and societal) within the constraints of human rationality, keeping the ideal of potential human growth in mind all of the time. This understanding is truly revolutionary and radical. It represents the vision of a *height* psychology/philosophy within a more expanded context of potentiality and utopian growth. It is a living psychology-philosophy of life, and as such, it must be recreated and understood differently by each individual. Cultural-historical psychology/philosophy should be understood within the original Vygotskian tradition, as much as possible.

Vygotsky's Russian Cultural-Historical Theory

“Cultural-historical psychology is connected with what Solov’ev called the ‘spiritual vertical,’ what Pasternak called ‘spiritual equipment,’ what Mandel’shtam called ‘the vertical section’ of time, what Aleksandr Ukhtomskii and Bakhtin called the ‘Chronotope,’ and so forth” (Zinchenko, 1995, p. 41). Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory takes the highest explanatory principle of philosophical consciousness, expanding it both outward and inward beyond psychology to include art, aesthetics, poetry, theater, semiotics, Marxism, Spinozist philosophy, and defectology (the study of mental and physical handicaps). At the same time this philosophy synthesizes and unifies the relationship of these and other disciplines related to the understanding of the unconscious/subconscious. Vygotsky’s focus includes a dialectical (not dualistic) vision within Spinozist and Marxist monism. Working within the tradition of German/Russian philosophy and psychology, Vygotsky took consciousness (in the real world, not just in philosophy) as his highest explanatory principle. His basic metapsychological focus is the connection between the

dialectic (representing the relative) and monism (representing the immutable, although it is assumed that this “substance” can also be subject to change). Holographic theory, in this context, is a metaphor that can be offered in today’s frame of reference, where the *whole* is imprinted within the parts, with both being necessary for growth and development at all levels. This is a reason why Vygotsky juxtaposed the *whole* together with *units* and not *elements*. Van der Veer (1997, p. 372) states that “the analysis into units breaks down a whole into the smallest possible component parts which retain the properties of the whole.” On the other hand, when elements are broken down they lose the properties of the whole.

Within Vygotsky’s method, there is a complete and constant connection between the individual and society that cannot be deconstructed into analyzable elements without losing the characteristics of the whole. It is the focus on the individual/social and internal/external that makes Vygotsky unique and holistic, not the reverse; however, this only makes sense when understanding that there is no culturally self-regulated individual without social structures emerging first. This point is very important, because Marxist philosophers have traditionally understood the “social” first, without a genuine focus on the individual, although Marxism was one of the philosophies attempting to place emphasis on individual activity via work, instead of focusing on idealized abstractions. Vygotsky’s extension of the Marxist “method” recaptures various tenets of Marxism that are important for a future reevaluation of the cultural-historical framework, while simultaneously incorporating the essence of individual, internal mechanisms. Internalization is one of the core values of cultural-historical theory, not representing the external/internal as the same isomorphic phenomena (as in activity theory), nor replacing it with conscious (versus subconscious) elements of mastery and appropriation (as in sociocultural theory). Rather, internalization is the dynamic, asymmetrical process of incorporating the social component and blending it with the spiritual alchemy and mystery of conscious and subconscious *cultural sign mediation* within our own lives, eventually producing individual self-regulation

within the matrix of social interaction. Vygotsky did not want to return to the problems of introspectionism (i.e., non-objectified understanding only), nor to the problems of empiricism (i. e., objectified understanding only). Since no one can step outside of his/her consciousness, areas of internalization/externalization become important from the start. We will never understand the complete dynamics of human consciousness simply because we will never be able to stand outside of ourselves to objectify the real meaning of this term. Therefore, consciousness is to be understood via semiotic mediation within a metapsychological level.

With his dialectical vision and understanding of psychology during the 1920s and early 1930s, Vygotsky established a method that was both abstract and concrete, one that would amplify and reflect upon consciousness related to theories of European philosophers, such as Spinoza, Marx, and von Humboldt, among others. Vygotsky then selected thinking and speech as his second explanatory principle, used as instruments in reflecting human consciousness. This process always includes a dialectical approach of positioning varying structures within opposite poles, while simultaneously including a holistic structure, in this case, consciousness. Vygotsky examined many trajectories of functional capacities (via their interrelationships), all of which maintain opposite points of origin. This process thus explains thought/speech and growth from a historical perspective, with each trajectory including change as a common dominator. It is precisely the trajectory of development that Vygotsky understood as growth, which takes place within the development of thought and speech, or variations on vocalized speech, such as sign language or Braille. For example, the origins of thought include the disposition of a pre-intellectual structure, whereas the origins of speech maintain the disposition of a pre-linguistic structure. It is through the dialectical process of “engagements” and “separations” of opposite poles of growth that development can occur. However, there must be a mature concept formation in place to construct and create meaningful generalizations. In order to understand psychology/philosophy from the perspective of a dialectical-monistic vision, Vygotsky needed a common denominator (both abstract and concrete) in order to measure

thinking and speech that would reflect and mediate consciousness. It was here that Vygotsky discovered the power of word meaning as the unit of analysis.

To date, most researchers in the Cartesian tradition view any science from the inductive, bottom-up perspective, deriving truth(s) from individual, often isolated, experiments that strive for the same results of the same experiments carried out in different conditions. Vygotsky's focus was to view holistic units first, capturing their essence, and then proceed by analyzing them scientifically (within the Humboldtian tradition), always connecting the units to the whole structure. Once again, Vygotsky viewed units within a dialectical frame of reference, which is asymmetrical and nonlinear, always connected to a more absolute level of higher explanatory principles (i.e., whole), which often expands his thinking into a tripartite method. Tension between the individual and the social parallels a similar tension between dialectics and monism (once again viewed metaphorically): “. . . All cultural development has three stages: development in itself, for others, and for oneself” (Vygotsky, 1989, p. 56). Development is located within emerging relationships when the individual is ready to absorb a new concept. For example, when the conditions are right, thinking is completed in the word and word is completed in thinking. For this to happen, there needs to be a general understanding that the development of concepts and word meaning function together within Vygotsky's metaphorical framework. Like grammar, word meanings are both concrete and abstract. With Vygotsky's development of spontaneous (everyday) and scientific or non-spontaneous (academic or scientific) concepts, many Western interpreters have misunderstood him. One pole is not higher or better than the other (and certainly not the cognitive side); and both of these seemingly opposite poles must merge in an asymmetrical, dynamic fashion to complement and actually complete each other, while including affective areas as well. Vygotsky viewed spontaneous concepts within a bottom-up direction, while scientific or non-spontaneous concepts were viewed within a top-down framework. Once again, this represents a dialectical vision without Cartesian dualism. Both

directions of development are necessary in establishing a holistic unit, and both directions of individual development are related to a monistic and holographic completeness.

Since his father first gave him a book by the 17th century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza in his youth, Vygotsky viewed life from Spinoza's philosophical perspective. This is one of the exact points that distinguish cultural-historical theory from activity theory, and sociocultural theory. Spinoza understood the world from a higher unified philosophical perspective, which he called the "monad," differing from Leibniz's concept of monad.² Spinoza's understanding represented a simple metaphor of the absoluteness ascribed to nature or God, sometimes referred to as one "substance." Within Vygotsky's dialectics and monism, a basic principle represents a higher level of human development being located within human *actions*, not *passions* in Spinozian terminology; and personal development is also viewed within societal development. Spinoza distinguished between two types of affections: (a) actions, "which are explained by the nature of the affected individual, and which spring from the individual's essence" (Deleuze, 1981, p. 27); and (b) passions, "which are explained by something else, and which originate outside the individual" (Deleuze, 1981, p. 27). Therefore,

[H]e [Spinoza] believed that human freedom was not, as was commonly held, indeterminacy of choice, but was self-determination, entirely by one's own nature, free from external compulsion. This, for him, was action proper, while determination by extraneous causes was passion, the subjection to which he called bondage. (Harris, 1992, p. 6)

Spinoza "did not accept the existence of Descartes' free, undetermined soul and refuted his dualism. This attitude was very important to Vygotsky, whose aims were similar . . ." (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 356). This practice lifts the individual to a higher level of selflessness. Regarding these beliefs, Vygotsky cannot be viewed as a relativist or an absolutist. He was a thinker truly interested in synthesis. The basic problem that remains paradoxical for many

Westerners is the Spinozian tenet of determinism, which goes against human free will in individualistic societies:

Since Spinoza was an eminent determinist, it followed from Vygotsky's presentation that a new form of determinism was generated in the philosophy of Spinoza---as a methodological base of a new psychological theory free of the birthmarks of the Cartesian method of thinking. According to Vygotsky, this theory has as its subject man as an integral and active psychophysical being, striving toward self--development, motivated only by bodily--spiritual needs. Its key category is the concept of motivation. (Yaroshevsky, 1999, p. 264)

It was within this higher explanatory principle that Vygotsky's method can be understood as a metapsychology. It is particularly important to note that absolute and relative aspects stand in relation to each other; for example, monism and holography stand in relation to dialectics, with both complementing each other. It should be understood that during his lifetime, Vygotsky did not accept all aspects of Spinoza's philosophy in explaining contemporary problems; for example, Spinoza did not include dialectics in his philosophy, something which became popular long after Spinoza's death. However, Spinoza wrote about the *whole* being connected to the *parts*, just as the *parts* are connected to the *whole*, and it was this vision of completeness that motivated Vygotsky's research throughout his entire life. Within the individual plane of consciousness, Vygotsky's philosophy of language and semiotics are directed at the potential free action of each person, which is located within internal, subjective relationships, together with the social, intersubjective networks of each individual. This understanding of free action is not in line with the Western tenets of the pursuit of individual happiness. Vygotsky's dialectic and monistic, or holographic, vision connects individual needs to that of the social, all of which combine to form a unity. It was precisely the value placed on the internal and emotional aspects of human life that distinguish Vygotsky's method. This position has been misunderstood in the past with some theorists prioritizing external functions, such as actions and speech, over internal functions, and

often not recognizing the value of *internal activity*. Certainly, the external should first be prioritized in Vygotsky's dialectical and monistic = holographic vision that always focuses on a synthesis and a unified whole. Vygotsky went a step further in viewing one's social and individual nature as a holistic unit that can only be broken down once the whole is approximated (which cannot happen without simultaneously analyzing the units). The only way to approximate an understanding of the whole is through the holographic lens of a metaphor and metatheory. Because of the vast nature of this undertaking, one does not speak of a completed Vygotskian theory. In addition, Vygotsky did not attempt to be prescriptive (apart from describing the stages of crises in child development), and this is another reason that there is no single Vygotskian method; each researcher and educator needs to establish his/her own unique Vygotskian method. Also, Vygotsky truly and sincerely believed in the philosophical, psychological, and societal potential of Marxism, something that differentiated him from many other Russian Marxists during the 1920s. It is suggested that Vygotsky was interested in the overall concept of Marxism to establish a radically new psychology, and not simply place psychology within Marxism. Governed by his belief in a holistic framework, he adopted Marx's understanding of the "cell." Vygotsky (1997, p. 331) stated:

What can be searched for in the teachers of Marxism before is not a solution of the question of the question, not even a working hypothesis . . . but a method to develop it...I want to learn from Marx's whole method how to build a science, how to approach the investigation of the mind.

The underlying premise is that there is no attempt to offer a simple Vygotskian approach, strategy, or even method. What is offered instead is the ultimate level of *consciousness raising* of each individual to establish his/her own working method that can also be implemented in practice. It is the higher level of metaphor that is first encouraged. The second principle is to acknowledge that human beings are not born into this world as freethinking individuals, but into a world of pre-established social norms and conventions. We can only become individuals in the

true sense of the word by connecting to the social world in a new fashion. The main focus of cultural-historical theory regards the transformative nature of internalization, which then leads to societal transformation. However, if this holistic unit is viewed alone we will not reach the potential of becoming self-actualized individuals. We must always incorporate the *general genetic law of development*, or the *doubling experience*, into our own Vygotskian method. This law states that “any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice or on two planes...It appears first between people as an intermental category, and then within the child as an intramental category” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 21). Another key component in establishing one’s own Vygotskian method is to always keep the view of process (as opposed to product) and development in mind.

It is paradoxical that writers who have interpreted the Russian cultural-historical tradition for the rest of the world have mostly been scholars in the West including Bruner, Scribner, Tobach, Wertsch, Bakhurst, Cole, van der Veer, Valsiner, Kozulin (who left Russia in 1979), among others. Interestingly, various theorists from around the world use different titles indiscriminately, sometimes without totally explaining these differences, and often without explaining their own unique relationship to Vygotsky. Some authors and practitioners refer to themselves as cultural-historical theorists, and some remain within the Russian tradition, while others anchor their thoughts in newer traditions. Other authors refer to themselves as activity theorists, and this label can represent the Russian version, the European version, and some new trends within cultural psychology. Some authors and practitioners refer to themselves as sociocultural theorists, and this can represent most anything today as it is best aligned with the postmodern world. This mixture of terminology has simultaneously resulted in a narrative of cohesion and confusion. Vygotskian thought has become popular precisely because of the fact that it can be interpreted in so many ways. However, the narrative in place has also been distorted regarding Vygotsky’s initial intentions. Clearly, without this infusion of distortions, many people

writing within various contexts would not have appropriated or internalized Vygotsky's ideas. Therefore, there is no attempt to place a value judgment on the narrative that ensued historically.

In understanding that cultural-historical theory is different from Russian activity theory, European/international activity theory, and sociocultural theory, it is hoped that readers will be aware of the fact that these theories all claim Vygotsky as their source of inspiration. Because of differences of personalities and political realities, however, there have been many twists and turns in the road. It is for this very reason that Vygotskian theory is so popular today. Without the differences in the various approaches taken, it is safe to say that Vygotsky's ideas would have died with him. Because of the vastness of Vygotsky's voice, many readers are more attracted to activity theory, and sociocultural theory, than to his cultural-historical method, although many also use this label.

Vygotsky was clearly a true genius. At the same time, it is comforting to know that he did not write for any personal fame or fortune. Vygotsky lived a very simple life, one that can be viewed as impoverished by today's standards. He died owning one suit. He tried to connect real theory with real practice, and he lived the highest standards of excellence possible, both in research and in his personal life. It is such a personality that we honor and respect in all of our interpretations of him. "All of his [Vygotsky's] behavior, the entire system of his relations with people, taught and educated his students, because they thought he was teaching them 'not only an attitude toward science, he was teaching them life'" (Vygodskaja & Lifanova, 1999, p. 51).³

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¹ It will be stated here that various thinkers within the Latin American and Portuguese tradition have developed theories that expand, complement, and sometimes complete the Vygotskian model of cultural-historical theory. Some examples are Paulo Freire (Brazil), Maria Rita Mendes Leal (Portugal), Fernando González-Rey (Cuba/Brazil), and Newton Duarte (Brazil).

² For more information on Leibniz's understanding of monads, see Jolley (1995, pp. 132--133):

“ . . . he [Leibniz] defines a monad as nothing but a simple substance that enters into composites---simple, that is, without parts . . . Simplicity is demanded of monads, since without simples there would be no composites; composites, by their very nature, are nothing but collections, or aggregates . . . However, in order to qualify as genuine simples, monads must be without parts, and hence without extension, shape or divisibility. From this initial definition, Leibniz draws two important consequences. First, a monad is subject to neither generation nor corruption . . . Second, there is no conceivable way in which one monad can be affected by another.”

³ Vygodskaja & Lifanova (1999): “N. G. Morozova, from a speech given at a meeting dedicated to Vygotsky's 70th anniversary, 27 December 1955. The L. S. Vygotsky family archives” (p. 87).