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Study of the Environment in the Pedological Works of L.S. Vygotsky

A Critical Study

As is well-known, the problem of the environment has occupied a central place in the field known as pedology. This problem has been approached from a general biological perspective (phylogenesis and fetal development), and from a psychological perspective. In our critical study, we will limit ourselves to an examination of the study of the environment [only] from a psychological perspective (a perspective fundamental to pedology), because it was only from this perspective that this study enters the works of L.S. Vygotsky.

Before turning to an analysis of Vygotsky's study of the environment, it will be necessary to first present, at least in broad outline, the state of this problem in the pedology of M.Ia. Basov, P.P. Blonskii, A.B. Zalkind, and others.

In a decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party dated June 4, 1936, on pedological perversions in the system of the People's Commissariat of Education, there is an absolutely clear description of all sorts of pedological views on the environment. At their foundation lies the theory of *fatalistic determinism*. Its essence is that development is understood as a process directly determined, on the one hand, by the innate characteristics of a child (his

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“abilities,” “talents”), and on the other, by the environment in which this development takes place. So the development of a child is viewed as a function of these two fundamental factors, no matter how complex the ways in which they combine and are interwoven.

It is clear that from this theoretical standpoint, the analysis of any fact of development inevitably leads us to the idea of its direct dependence either on innate factors or the environment, or, finally, the *aggregate* effect of both of these factors. It is this analysis that was carried out in practice in pedological research. Endless “investigation” of the environment and the ability of the child were the alpha and omega of pedological efforts. Because the very concept of the environment was left, as we will see, almost without any serious scientific analysis, and the true meaning of the concept of ability was often veiled in many ways, hidden behind other terms, these investigations took on a completely surrealistic appearance at times. Thus, for example, the scheme of pedological investigation of the environment, designed by the office of the Academy of Communist Education [AKV], included questions about “the economy of the district in the oblast or krai system,” or the problem of the reach of industrial enterprises of socialist reconstruction and the characteristics of education workers of a given district (their social composition, party membership, service to the community), and, finally, a complete description of the enterprise associated with a given school, with clarifications regarding the nature of its equipment, its success in the area of innovation, its prospects for the future, and so on (*Pedology* [Pedologiia], ed. G. Tatulov and R. Vilenkina [Moscow: AKV, 1932, pp. 22–23]). A similar scheme is introduced in a pedology textbook edited by M.N. Sherdakov.*

Of course, this utterly excessive expansion for studying the environment, which, furthermore, comes with the authors’ modest desire that their data be compared even with prerevolutionary data, is probably an exception to the rule, albeit an exception quite characteristic for pedological study of the environment.¹

And what was the *theoretical* state of the problem of the environment in pedology? We can identify the following three fundamental questions that guided the theoretical formulation of this problem: (1) the general question of the *role* of the environment; (2) the question of the uniqueness of the *human* environment; and (3) the question of the *changeability* and *relativity* of the environment for the child.

Even at the first All-Russia Pedological Congress in 1927, both prevailing viewpoints in pedology regarding the role of the environment in the process of

*Many references are missing in the original Russian text. Henceforth, all missing references are marked with an asterisk.—Eds.

development of the child were expressed. According to one view, the environment is only a single factor, *contributing* to the process of the unfolding of the attributes within the child; the environment brings to life or suppresses, reinforces or stunts the maturation of childhood behavioral mechanisms. From the other, opposite, external perspective, the environment *determines* development; it actively builds the activity of the child, simply making use of the innate resources of his personality.

Of course, neither of these means used in deciding the question of the role of the environment is original; they are both simply pedagogical refrains of bourgeois views on psychological development, which are theoretically based on either an idealistic (in the spirit of vitalism) or a mechanistic worldview. Nonetheless, these two fundamental viewpoints have been held by pedagogists until the most recent days of its existence.

The first viewpoint was represented within contemporary Western psychology by K. Bühler and others, reaching us most coherently in the pedagogy of D.N. Uznadze; the second perspective, which also has its proponents in bourgeois psychology, was shared by the vast majority of Soviet pedagogists, in particular M.Ia. Basov, A.V. Zalkind, and at one time by L.S. Vygotsky as well.²

Of course, these views took on quite different forms with different authors; nonetheless, whatever particular theory we took for analysis—“recapitulation,” “conformity,” “convergence,” or “coincidence,”—we would invariably find one of two *basic* means used in solving the problems of the environment.

Despite all their apparent dissimilarities, and in a certain sense, their mutual hostilities, both approaches have one point in common, they equally originate in the understanding of the environment as an *external factor*; contrast the activity of the child and the environment where it takes place; and finally, attempt to find a unified, universal formula for relations with the environment. Therefore, despite phraseology about a person’s social formation, his social nature, and so on, that may disguise it, these approaches are both alien to Marxism and *remain completely captive to bourgeois theories*.

The very formulation of the question of the role of the environment is defective here, inevitably stemming from pedagogy’s understanding of its subject matter. In pursuit of a “unified” study of the child, encompassing both his physiology and his psychology, and attempting to combine both through their *direct* relationship, pedagogists saw in those connections many different sides that characterize the child as a certain “natural whole,” as something metaphysical, we would prefer to say.

In this understanding, a double methodological mistake is expressed, a mistake characteristic of pedagogy. This mistake is, on the one hand, a failure to understand that something taken in the abstract is not an object of science, that “of

bodies removed from motion, removed from any relation to other bodies, nothing can be asserted” (F. Engels, letter to Marx dated March 30, 1873, K. Marx and F. Engels, *Letters* [Pis'ma], 4th ed., 1932, p. 294), that the properties of things are discovered only through their *essential interrelationships*, that “a property is that very interaction” (V.I. Lenin, *The Lenin Collection* [Leninskii sbornik], vol. 9, p. 127). Failing to understand this, from the very beginning, pedology, from the starting point of its investigations, stripped away the *true* unity: the unity of subject and object, the personality of a person and his human reality. Through abstraction, the child was removed from the real process of life, from the interaction that is his real existence.

On the other hand, his mistake was internally connected with the incorrect assumption that the relationship between various aspects or properties of an object can be scientifically investigated using the method of direct mutual correlation. Thus, in relation to the most important problem of psychological and physiological aspects, pedology only repeated the classical mistake of all bourgeois positivistic psychology, which was never raised to the level of understanding the principle of the interconnection and transition of some lower forms of movement of material into other, higher forms. Therefore, the entire extent of its historical path was based on false assumptions of epiphenomenalism—on assumptions acknowledging the psyche to be a purely subjective phenomenon, and, consequently, the recognition that it is a simple duplicate of the physiological. We assert that given such a metaphysical understanding of psychological and physiological elements, their true relationship is hopelessly lost to scientific study, as is the true carrier of this relationship itself. It is understood that as a result of this double methodological mistake, the subject of pedology inevitably turns into a *false* science.

At first glance, it may seem problematic to reconcile our proposition regarding the abstract character of the pedological approach to the subject of development—the child—with the fact that the child is usually viewed by pedologists specifically as an “active actor in the environment” (M.Ia. Basov and others),* and that the problem of the environment, as we have only just recognized, was central to pedology. This objection, however, is founded on an illusion. Both the child and the environment truly were studied by pedological researchers, but they were studied only as externally contrasted, abstract things. In what connections and relations did pedology study every given object entering into the makeup of the environment? As is clearly seen from the seemingly essential regional requirements that were formulated in this sense by pedology, in the best case it was studied irrespective of the child, that is, as an instance of objective sociohistorical reality. On the other hand, the child, as well, was essentially studied only as a carrier of a set of certain

internal properties and instincts. But exactly this approach is metaphysical. A given object *as an environment* exists only in relation to a certain subject. But what exactly is this relationship? It does not exist, of course, in “pure” form, only as a logical relationship; it is nothing more than the content of a subject’s specific activity. A given object becomes the environment only when it enters the reality of subject’s activity as an aspect of this reality; examining it through any other connections and relations will not permit us to find out anything about what kind of an environment it is. Thus, for instance, temperature conditions exist as a value of the environment—a positive or negative value—only in relation to a specific organism. Furthermore, it is easy to understand that, for instance, the very same climatic conditions can differ not only in relation to the “temperature tolerance” of a given human group, taken in its natural, anthropological properties, but primarily depending on the stage of the economic development it is in; thus, what is *decisive* here are such factors as the production of clothing and housing, the manner of finding food, and so on, and not only the climate or the characteristics of people in and of themselves. This is how historical materialism frames this question, explaining the fact of one or another influence of the natural environment on society on the basis of analysis primarily of the given society’s economy. What *defines* the relationship between society and the natural environment, consequently, is the state of its productive forces, which characterize the true content of this relationship. This is the only correct way to frame the question, and, of course, it remains so when we move to examining the relationship between the individual and his environment. Here, too, we see that in every case the relationship between a person and the environment is defined not by the environment and not by abstract properties of his personality, but specifically by the content of his activity, by the level of development of this activity, and, if it can be expressed this way, by its structure and formation.

It is understood, on the other hand, that when outside of his activity, in relation to reality and to his “environment,” the subject is just as much an abstraction as is the environment outside of its relationship to the subject.

Failing to understand this, pedology inevitably adopted metaphysical positions, and, regardless of the extent to which it may have emphasized the close connection between the child and the environment, this connection essentially took the specific form of an external connection. Pedology, therefore, made fruitless efforts to understand the laws of the development of the child’s personality as being the laws of this external connection, of this external relationship. But a law never reflects external connections, and the true dialectic of development is never the replication of external contradictions along the lines of Bukharin’s “equilibrium.” Therefore, pedology, wavering between the poles

of the notorious “two factors,” even in the best case scenario was only able to repeat in its language the anti-Marxist formula of [Karl] Kautsky that every object is directly defined by the conditions of its external environment. In reality, this is the formula that pedology arrived at, represented by proponents of the so-called theory of sociogenesis.

We have decided to leave subjectivist biologically based views on the role of the environment without special discussion. They provide nothing new for the understanding of the principle aspects of our problem, as they completely share the initial position of the theory of two factors, and only shift the emphasis toward the opposite pole, emphasizing the decisive significance of natural-biological features of personality.

We can leave these views without examination, all the more so as their reactionary nature has already been revealed more than once in our criticism; a further in-depth analysis of the corresponding theories is far beyond the scope of a general article and should be the subject of a separate study.

* * *

Closely tied to the overall question of the environment’s role is a second question, which we have emphasized, about the specific nature of the human social environment. Although it is impossible to find a clear answer to this question in pedology we, nonetheless, cannot avoid it because the solution to our overall problem depends to a great extent on one or another of its answers.

In most cases, pedology textbooks are limited to the most general thoughts—although at times expressed in quite emotional terms, that the social environment is a “completely distinctive factor,” although “the significance of this factor is difficult to express through any word or formula due to its exceptional breadth” (M.Ia. Basov)*; that the social environment is distinct from the biological environment because of its “dynamism” (A.B. Zalkind)*; that it is “all-penetrating”; that it is not without its own contradictions; and that it acts “according to the principle of class struggle” (*Textbook of Pedology* [Uchebnik pedologii] [Moscow: AKV Press, n.d.], pp. 68–69), and so forth.

We have not permitted ourselves to stop and criticize each of these “theoretical” propositions separately, and we are attempting to move directly to an analysis of the essence of the question.

If an animal’s sole and indisputable environment is of an external nature, then what changes take place with the appearance of the human being and the development of human society?

Is this natural environment transformed into a special “dynamic” social environment? In other words, to put it simply, does it happen that now in the

vital relations of the human being, society or a special social environment takes the place of nature, or does that new social environment develop side by side with the natural environment, doubling it? Perhaps, finally, both of these environments interact, so that one “penetrates” and “permeates” the other (M.Ia. Basov)?* Of course, all of these assumptions, directly or indirectly present in pedological writings, are deeply mistaken.

What distinguishes humans from animals is not that they have broken their connection with nature, or that the natural environment has been replaced by society, but primarily they have entered into a new and active relationship with nature. In other words, humans enter into a relationship with nature that is realized through the process of labor, through activity using tools; consequently, their relation to nature becomes one mediated primarily by objects. But *through this process* humans enter into a certain relationship with other humans, and only through these relationships—with nature itself. Consequently, their relationship to nature is mediated by their relationship to other humans. This means that for humans, the way that nature appears is no longer determined by the direct properties of natural objects themselves, and not even by the specific interrelations among people, fixed in their instinctive activity, but by the social conditions of their existence, their activity as social beings. Consequently, this means that since human beings become human, *any* object of their activity, even a natural one, becomes for them a human object, that is, a social object. Even food, according to Marx, in its natural, abstract existence, plays a role only for a *hungry* human; but then the very means used to satisfy the need for food cease to be human or to be distinct from the animal means for satisfying this need (K. Marx, “Preliminary Material for the ‘Holy Family’” in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works* [Sobr. soch.] vol. 3 [Moscow, 1934], pp. 627–28).

To the animal, however, any “artificial” object created by humans is simply a natural object, it is nature because the animal’s relation toward it will always be an instinctive relation. Thus, of course, in reality there is no doubling of the environment. The environment as a whole is transformed into a human environment, that is, for the human being, into a social environment, based on the fact that humans themselves relate to it in human terms, that is, as social humans. On the other hand, in the process of sociohistorical development, the very makeup of this environment changes: the social conditions of human existence take on a certain material form for the human being, the form of the products of sociomaterial production, and the form of certain productive relations that exist at a given moment between people; finally, they also appear in the form of secondary, superstructural formations, that is, in the form of language, in the form, generally speaking, of ideology.

Of course, for individuals, the conditions themselves may vary depending on their place within the system of social production; in a class society, this is primarily determined by the class a person belongs to, but it must be understood that a person's class membership itself appears only as *his* class membership, as the class membership of a given, concrete subject of activity.

Such are the *general* theoretical propositions, which we had to contrast from the start to the conjectures of those in pedological “sociogenetists” regarding the child's developmental environment. But, how *specifically-psychologically* does the social environment appear in the process of the child's development? This is the third question we emphasize—the question of the changeability and relativity of the environment. It is more fully developed by L.S. Vygotsky, and his examination of it leads us directly to the pedological works of this author.

* * *

L.S. Vygotsky's studies of the environment are made up of a number of separate propositions that have been connected to a unified system, but are far from equivalent, and that we must subject to careful critical analysis before evaluating them as a whole.

Vygotsky begins with the general proposition that any psychological fact contains both the properties of the subject, joined in a unity that cannot be divided mechanically and corresponding to psychological activity, and the properties of reality in relation to which this activity is carried out. According to Vygotsky, “no development is made up of the mechanical combining of two factors—two external forces, that, in combining with one another, advance this development,” and the role of the environment can be explained only through an analysis of the specific relations with the environment into which the child enters.³

This proposition appears indisputable to us; the question is to what extent the author will succeed in making it more concrete in further research investigations.

If the role of the environment can be discovered only through an analysis of the relation of the child to reality—through an analysis that does not mechanically split this relationship—obviously, a certain *unity* must be found in which, united, the personal traits of the child and the features of the given environment are both presented. In Vygotsky's thinking, such a unity is *experiencing* [perezhivanie]. “Experiencing is a unity,” says Vygotsky, “in which, in indivisible form, on the one hand, the environment, that which is being experienced, is presented—the experiencing of everything relates to something existing outside the person—and, on the other hand, how I experience it, that is, all of the special features of personality and all the special features of the

environment are present in experience.”⁴ Specifically through experience, the environment exerts influence of one sort or another on the child.

What is experiencing? Vygotsky defines experiencing as the unity of environmental and personality factors, but this is a formal definition. Therefore, to determine its true meaning, we must turn to an examination of how it actually appears as presented by the author.

Vygotsky writes, “The experiencing of a situation, the experiencing of an environment, determines what influence this situation or environment will have on the child. Thus, not any feature in and of itself, taken without reference to the child, but a feature as it is refracted through the experiencing of the child, can determine how this feature will influence the course of his subsequent development.”⁵ Experiencing, consequently, is that into which the environment is refracted for the child. It is easy to understand that truly every object in a situation appears in different ways to, let us say, a one-year-old child and a seven-year-old child. To a one-year-old, the watch in his father’s hands is simply a shiny, swaying object, but the very same watch for a child of seven is an instrument for determining the time, it is a watch; for a well-fed child, the prospect of supper looks different than it does for a child who is hungry; a weak child has a different experience of an athletic game than does a physically strong child, and so forth.

This is obvious, but it is only a *description* of the actual state of things. The most decisive question here is what *determines* a child’s experiencing in a given situation, and by what means it is determined. Is it, on the one hand, environmental influences, or is it, on the other hand, constitutional features? However, this answer again returns to the position of the theory of factors that we have just rejected. Introducing the concept of experiencing does not, in and of itself, solve the problem, and we again return to the beginning proposition, the only difference being that experiencing, as the specific form through which the whole personality manifests itself, now occupies the place that formerly belonged to the whole personality of the child. Objections may be raised, and we already have the answer: the influence of the environment and the influence of the special features of a child are in turn both determined by experiencing. This, however, is a false solution to the problem, as it traps us in a logical vicious circle that may keep us going in circles eternally, as experiencing is devoid of its own movement, and, consequently, both of these factors appear as external forces in relation to it. So, we must seek some other explanation. The author provides one: “The situation will influence the child in different ways depending on how well the child understands its sense and meaning. For instance, imagine a family member is dying. Obviously, a child who understands what death is will react to this differently than a child who

does not understand at all what has happened. In other words, the influence of the environment on the child's development will be measured among other influences, as will the degree of understanding, awareness, and comprehension of what is happening in the environment."⁶ This circle is thus broken: experiencing itself is determined by understanding, that is, by consciousness. True, the author qualifies this by stating that consciousness determines the effect of the environment only "among other influences," but this stipulation is very symptomatic in and of itself. Nevertheless, it is not essential to its fundamental, emphasized meaning: the effect of the environment depends on the child's degree of comprehension of the environment, and on the significance it has for him.

Having freed ourselves from the term "experiencing," which remains inaccessible to the end for Vygotsky, we have finally succeeded in putting the question in its completely clear and bare form: in the form of a question about the relationship between a child's consciousness and his activity in the objective reality that surrounds him. In its concrete-psychological form, this question appears not only as central to Vygotsky's theory as a whole, but generally as a central psychological question that requires us to cross the artificial boundaries of pedagogical problems in our subsequent analysis.

* * *

Studies of the development of thought and consciousness of the child led Vygotsky to a very important psychological understanding of *meaning*. Meaning is a generalization that realistically-psychologically stands behind the word that it stands for. As Vygotsky expressed it, meaning is a unit of human, realistic consciousness. When a child is aware of something, for example, *this* table, it means that a given individual thing is represented by his thinking consciousness in certain associations and relationships, which, if the child's thinking is correct, correspond to the table's true communication and relationships. For instance, he may think of this table in associations that connect it in his consciousness with other tables, in their common use as tables at which food is eaten, tables at which homework is done, and so forth, or in associations that connect it with objects that can be arranged, through a broader commonality. However, one can also think of that table as merchandise, as a social relationship. The difference between all of these aspects, of course, will be the difference not only in the material makeup of the communication and relationships represented, but also in the very *structure* of the corresponding generalizations (of the corresponding thinking operations). A child is not born with preconceived meanings, and he is also not born with a finished structure

of these meanings that is filled in with various content only via the process of development. Consequently, meanings develop; the development of meaning is the specific form in which the development of the child's consciousness takes place.⁷

How does this development take place? We have already said that meaning always takes the form of the meaning of a word, which—like *language*, which exists for other people and only in this sense exists for me, myself—according to the well-known definition of Marx, is “true consciousness.”⁸ But, having acquired a word, does a child immediately possess its complete meaning, if we can express it this way? What, for instance, is the meaning of the word “cooperative” for a child hearing this word for the first time? Obviously, he can understand this word, for example, as signifying a store in general, or stores that sell food products, and so on, but it is impossible to presume that it will immediately take shape in his consciousness in, let us say, the sense of “an economic association of consumers.” So, the development of meaning is not the same as the simple acquisition of a word. Furthermore, the development of meaning, according to Vygotsky, does not coincide with change in the objective reference of a word (its objective content); it is specifically the development of the *formation of generalizations* that stand behind a word, and characterizes the formation of consciousness as a whole.

What determines this formation? We find the answer in Vygotsky's works—if we set aside the complicated idea of the different course of development of the “spontaneous” and “scientific”⁹ concepts—it is as follows: from the very first steps of his development, the child enters into contact with adults around him, encounters language and the fact of the specific requirements of words and their meanings, which he subsequently acquires. So, meaning develops through the process of communication. Apart from communication the child cannot acquire speech—it is specifically communication that forms the child's consciousness, it is specifically in communication (in studying, in “cooperation”) that he acquires this new structure, and on the basis of this he reshapes the structure of his previous understandings.¹⁰

The fact that the child enters into communication in the process of his interaction with objective reality does not add anything new in that the child perceives the very objects of this reality through a prism of meaning, that is, they themselves appear as meaning. The true driving force of child development lies in his communication with the people around him, taking place under specific historical conditions. Thus, according to Vygotsky, the child develops primarily as a *social being*.¹¹ Can we, however, take this equally indisputable assertion as a conclusion drawn in and of itself from the author's propositions introduced above? We presume that it cannot.

What, indeed, is communication as the term is used by Vygotsky? We are aware of two usages of the term: first, its usage to signify the general fact of people's interrelations, which encompasses their "material dealings," and second, its usage in the ordinary, more narrow sense, in the sense of "spiritual" relationships, that is, in the sense of communication using language. Obviously, for Vygotsky, it has only the second, narrower meaning. So, the process of verbal communication is defining for the child's psychological development; and consequently, the child appears in Vygotsky's work as *social*, and first and foremost as *a socialized* being. But, behind the superficial similarities of these two words lies a gulf separating their sense—the same gulf that separates materialism and idealism.

Viewed as the subject of communication, the child, inevitably—whether or not the author wants this—is transformed through this into an "ideal psychological" subject, and the environment—into an ideal psychological environment. It is along these lines that the conception of the environment is further developed by Vygotsky.

In order to discover the role of communication [contact with people] as a driving force of development, the author introduces the understanding of a final ("ideal") form. This is a form existing in the environment from the very beginning, which the child acquires in the process of his development. For example, the forms of speech that appear in a child only at the end of his development already exist in the environment that surrounds him when he is just starting to talk.

The child speaks in sentences made up of single syllables, but the mother speaks with the child using grammatically and syntactically formed speech and a large vocabulary—albeit limited in reference to the child—but in any event, she speaks using a developed form of speech. Let us call this the developed form that should appear at the end of a child's development . . . final or ideal form—ideal in the sense that it is a model of what results at the end of development . . . and let us call the form of speech of the child himself the initial form, the beginning form. The utmost feature of child development is that it takes place under conditions of interaction with the environment, where the ideal form . . . not only exists in the environment and touches the child from the very beginning, but *truly interacts* with and truly influences the initial form.¹²

The influence of the final, ideal form is characteristic, of course, not only of speech development in the narrow sense. The author continues:

For instance, how does the concept of quantity, how does arithmetical thought develop in the child? As is well known, the child, initially, at preschool age,

still has a limited and hazy concept of quantity. *But these initial forms of child arithmetical thought exist in interaction with the already developed arithmetical thought of the adult*, that is, again, the final form that should appear as a result of all child development is already present from the beginning of child development, and it is not only present but also *actually determines* and directs the child's first steps on the path to the development of this form.¹³

So, the environment appears as the vehicle of those forms that determine development. Are these forms ideal only in the sense that they are *final* forms or are they ideal in the sense that they are forms of social *consciousness*? Obviously, they are ideal in the latter sense as well, a word in its capacity as a final form does not have an effect as a sound, but as a sign, as a carrier of meaning, that is, specifically as an "ideal" thing, a product of spiritual culture; in the same way, a child enters into interactions not with quantities as such, but in the words of the author himself, "with developed arithmetical thought." The interaction that takes place here is specifically interaction with forms of social consciousness; so the child, too, enters into this interaction specifically in his capacity as a subject of consciousness. Thus, the theory of environment put forth by Vygotsky, locked in the circle of consciousness, loses its initial materialistic position and is transformed into an idealistic theory.

Of everything that Vygotsky developed theoretically, the conception of the environment is the weakest. In that conception, as in a magic trick, collected in a unified, false construction, were all the theoretical mistakes, inconsistencies of thought, and individual idealistic views that we find in his main psychological works. They suffice in it, and therefore specifically in this conception Vygotsky least of all succeeds in overcoming the views of neopositivism that are traditional in contemporary French bourgeois psychology.

As is well known, neopositivism sees the social nature of the human psyche in the fact that it is a product of the interaction "of a cerebrally rich talented individual" with the content of "the collective," that is, societal experience crystallized in collective ideas—conceptions. It is in this interaction—comprising the facts of association and of the transmission of knowledge, feelings, aspirations, and goals—that the development of the human psyche takes place. In relation to individuals, these forms, as a *type* of thought, are already given in advance in the content of human culture:

The system of conceptions that serves as the means by which we think . . . is already contained in the dictionary of our mother tongue, as any word expresses a concept. . . . Any conversation, any intellectual association between people specifically constitutes an exchange of concepts. . . . A person who does not think in concepts would not be a person because he would not

be a social being. Having only individual perceptions, he would not be distinguished in any way from an animal.¹⁴

The source of the human psyche is society; the process by which it is formed is communication.

Arriving at the position of the neopositivists, in his study of the environment Vygotsky shares the overall fate of their theories: having reestablished the unity of personality and the environment at the expense of material social relations, and locking the entire formation in a circle of factors of knowledge, he arrives at the impossibility of preserving this unity of personality itself, and at the same time enters again into a contradiction with his own initial propositions. We now understand why the author's stipulation that not only meaning determines experience, remains a stipulation, and personality, as a carrier of biological features, appears in his work only in initial definitions and isolated examples.

The inevitability of dividing up the human essence was fully taken into account by its proponents, for those coming from the positions of positivist sociology; therefore what appears in Vygotsky in the form of a loss of initial positions is openly declared by De Roberti and Durkheim: "Man . . . is a dual being. There are two beings in him: an individual being with roots in the organism, the circle of whose activity is therefore narrowly limited, and a social being, which represents the highest reality of intellectual and moral order that we are able to know only through observation—I have in mind society."* This declaration may serve as a banner for neopositivists, but it turns into a death sentence for Vygotsky's theory of the environment.

The overall problem remains unresolved: setting personality and environment against one another now appears as the opposition of the biological principle and the sociological principle within the human personality itself. It cannot be resolved at this cost—at the cost of sliding into the abstract-sociological theory of neopositivism.

Vygotsky's theory of the environment, finally, shares the fate of all such pedagogical theories: the idea of final forms of development, already existing in the environment and determining child development, which again returns this theory to the position of the pedagogical understanding of the environment as a factor, the only difference being that the environment itself appears now as an ideal, cultural reality, as the reality of social consciousness.

The author himself expresses this thought:

Essentially, the fact that man . . . acquires the forms of the activity of consciousness that are worked out by mankind . . . lies at the basis of the interaction between the ideal form and the initial form. . . . The environment is the *source of development* of these specific properties and qualities, first and

foremost in the sense that it is in the environment that those historically developed properties and special features of man exist.¹⁵

In his research, Vygotsky attempted to essentially move the problems of the environment onto the plane of psychology, that is, onto the plane of *true science*; this allows us to criticize his theory not only to reveal its groundlessness, and essentially characterize the philosophical views behind it, but also to require that it find the concrete propositions contained in it that lead the author to generally mistaken positions in order to contrast them to propositions that are, from our perspective, correct. Finally, we must also find what it contains, what is genuinely vital, and what psychology cannot pass over in its future work, just as it cannot pass over the problem of the environment itself—a problem that cannot be mechanically eliminated or bypassed in specific psychological research. For that, however, we must definitively discard the false scientific pedagogical positions and conduct our subsequent analysis from within the boundaries of a strictly psychological framing of the question.

As we have seen, the theory of the environment developed by Vygotsky inevitably leads to a loss of the unity of a specific personality of the child: we have seen, on the other hand, that Vygotsky persistently attempts to preserve this unity. For this very purpose, he introduces the concept of experiencing that, in accordance with its initial definition, does not coincide with the concept of meaning as a unit of consciousness, but serves to signify the particular relationship that has been determined between the subject, taken in all its corporality, and the environment. “It is clear,” L.S. Vygotsky says, “that if we are going to have people with opposite constitutional traits, that one and the same event may provoke different experiences in each of them.”¹⁶

Thus, experiencing is dependent not only on the consciousness of its subject in the literal sense but also on the *biological*, constitutional features of his personality. Why then, in that case, is the subject transformed in Vygotsky’s conception of the environment into the subject of a consciousness whose interaction with reality is determined by ideal interaction—the interaction of meanings? We presume that this is an essential consequence of the fact that experience is a primary and original psychological fact for Vygotsky, while in reality, experience is a secondary and derivative fact.

Vygotsky places an entirely correct requirement before any psychological analysis: a psychological analysis must not destroy the unity of the subject and his environment, but must be directed at the very *relationship* that personality enters into with the reality that surrounds it. But what kind of a relationship is this? Is the only psychological content of this phenomenon experience as a separate internal state of the subject, as a fact of his consciousness? Obviously, this cannot be, since the subject is not only in a relationship with reality

in its capacity as *he who experiences* this reality, that is, as the subject who perceives, thinks, and feels it, but first and foremost he *acts* in relation to this reality, carrying out the material process of his life. Only in that material process of life does he discover himself as a being who possesses the ability of experiencing—of consciousness.

The child, like all of mankind, begins his development starting with material activity in relation to material reality. Before engaging the objects of this reality in some sort of theoretical “spiritual” relationship, he must eat, breathe, and direct his other vital functions, that is, he must act as a completely practical and material being.

Before a child enters into verbal communication with his mother, he relates to her as the being that directly feeds him, as the thing that fulfills his primary instinctive need—the need for food. But even if we examine more complex forms of satisfying the child’s needs—forms on the basis of which his higher, specifically human needs develop, even then it will turn out that his relation to reality is nonetheless primarily a material relationship.

A mother, of course, not only feeds her child, that is, she herself is not only the object of his need, but mediates his relation to other things. Consequently, almost from the very first steps in his development, the child enters into a relationship with the objective reality that surrounds him through another person, that is, through the very process of communication. But if the child enters into a relationship with the objects of reality through other people, this also means that his relationship to people is now mediated through the world of these very objects.

When a mother hands a child a thing that he has asked her for, in this act lies an essential *dual* relation: the child not only carries out an action in relation to a given object through his mother, but his relation to his mother itself now occurs through the relation to this object. To put it another way, this specific relationship between the child and another person occurs initially, only to the extent that it is a precondition for carrying out his relationship to an object he needs.¹⁷

These uniquely human forms of a child’s life are objectively given to us from the beginning; they are given in the child himself through the fact of his specific physical organization, through the simple fact that he has arms able to act and a head able to think; they are given as well in the reality that surrounds him, and, furthermore, not only in the form of objects that can meet his developing human needs but also in the form of ready social conditions and means that determine the human forms of his activity. Only within this always “practical” process of life, the child also encounters a particular historical product—social consciousness and thought, primarily reified through language as a

medium of communication, but not only in language, also in material media that carry a socially fixed way, a manner of action, that is, a unique “meaning.”

Acquiring a word as a medium of association, the child also acquires its meaning, which can initially be opened to him in only one way: for this it is necessary that the word be included in one or another real relationship between the child and the thing the given word signifies.

In showing a child something, when I use a word to name it, the first requirement that must be met for this word to take shape in the child’s consciousness is the existence of a certain relationship between the child himself and the thing I have named. The content of this relationship will be the first thing to appear in the meaning of the given word for the child. Later, when the child applies this word to other individual things in his passive speech, that is, repeating after adults, then the developed generalization that corresponds to it will no longer be a function of the use of the word in the speech of adults, but will always result from the interaction of *two* factors: first, the actual relationship of the child to the things signified, and, second, the purely linguistic phenomenon of the movement of a word through a series of various individual things it signifies (i.e., the *actual* meaning), while what is *foremost* in this interaction is, of course, the *first* factor. This is an indisputable tenet of psychology that can be definitively proved experimentally.

Thus, the meaning of a child’s word is this very “ideal” product in which his human relation to the reality signified by the given word crystallizes—a reality prominent now within the thinking consciousness of the child himself. The sociohistorical nature of the child psyche is determined, consequently, not by the fact that he communicates, but by the fact that his relationship to reality is socially and objectively mediated, that is, by the fact that his reality takes shape under specific sociohistorical conditions.

We have already stated that initially this is always external activity related to the material objects of the reality that surrounds the child. Only later, at relatively higher stages of development, can activity also appear in the form of truly “ideal” activity, theoretically interrelating the child with “a theoretical” object, for instance, in the form of abstract thought, far removed from practical action and from an immediate material object of activity. However, this separate internal activity remains only a special form of activity of a social man, a form that can develop only under historical conditions where the division of labor makes this separate activity vitally real as a result of the simple fact that in exchange for its theoretical product, man receives a material product of the practical activity of another man. So, in this “pure” activity of consciousness, man is never free from the specific sociohistorical conditions of his material life, and, in relation to his activity, these conditions are as compelling (albeit

in a special way), as immediate material conditions are in relation to practical action that takes the form of the direct “interrelations between things and man.” It is understood that in a particular ontogenesis, the conditions of development of this activity are also given in the environment from the very beginning; however, in this case as well, they are given specifically only as *conditions* and not as a *source* of the activity’s development.

The child, therefore, appears before us primarily as a subject of the material process of life. In the process of his development, he encounters ready-made, historically established conditions that determine his existence as a social being. Among these conditions, he encounters the fact of language, which is the medium of the “spiritual relations” established with it and constitutes an essential condition for the development of his social and intellectual consciousness. Thus, Vygotsky’s proposition that consciousness is a product of the child’s verbal communication under conditions of his activity and in relation to the material reality that surrounds him must be turned around: the consciousness of a child is a product of his human activity in relation to objective reality, taking place under conditions of language and under conditions of verbal communication.

It is specifically this proposition that is decisive. If historical reality itself appears to us now not in its abstract sociological sense, that is, not as a system of historically established social concepts—meanings or “types” of thought—not only as a cultural (in the *narrow* sense of the word) environment, but primarily as the reality of material social relations, then, of course, the child, too, as a subject of activity in relation to this reality, in the same way appears in all of his unity and materiality. Here too, of course, nothing essentially changes, as long as we are dealing with the “ideal” theoretical activity of the child. And the organs of this activity are no less bodily and “physiological” than the organs of his practical material activity; they are just as conditioned by his biological properties and his constitution as these other organs are, but they also *cannot*, of course, be *equated* with these properties and these internal organic, physiological processes in which they directly manifest themselves, just as even the simplest external intelligent human actions cannot be equated with these processes. Therefore, any “state of consciousness,” if taken as a subject’s internal organic reality, can be only the system of his physiological processes; on the contrary, however, it reveals itself as something psychological, that is, according to its self definition, only when we view it within the relationship between the subject and material reality, the only place where it [consciousness] arises.

Therefore, Vygotsky’s introduction of the concept of experiencing would seem to confuse rather than solve the problem at hand, since in order to discover a

true unity of human personality within psychology we must decisively reject viewing man as the subject of experience *par excellence*. Experience, as a secondary and derivative fact, is determined *directly and immediately* neither by a subject's physiological properties nor by the properties of the object of experience itself. How I experience a given object is, in reality, determined by the content of my relation to this object or, to put it more precisely, by the content of the activity through which I realize this relationship; it is specifically from this content that results in actual physiological regularities. Consequently, only by viewing man as the subject of activity will we be able to discover the specific unity of the physiological and the psychological, the "internal" and the "external" in his personality.

There is a second central question directly tied to this: can we view experiencing as an initial psychological fact specifically in the sense that experiencing determines the degree and nature of the influence of a given situation or, speaking in general terms, of a given object of reality on a subject? We assert that we cannot. After all, how a given object appears in experience is determined by the activity of the subject in relation to this object. Experience truly appears in each specific act of human activity, but it is neither the activity itself nor its cause, because before becoming a cause, activity itself is a result. In experiencing, in this unique state of a subject whereby he enters into some sort of a relationship with reality, his past activity is only crystallized, just as it is crystallized in any functional state of the organs of his actions—in the surveying of the eyes, the customary movement of the hand, and in the working apparatus of thought. Frightened by fantastic stories, a child can experience terror in a dark room; one can say that he "experiences" the room not as the familiar setting he knows, not as his room, but as something unfamiliar, mysterious, and frightening. This experience of the child is truly the prism through which the entire situation of the dark room is refracted for him at this moment; but, like any experience, it does not endure and is transformed under the influence of its own incompatibility with the objective properties of the situation that actually appear in the activity of the subject. In this dialectic of the interplay of experience and activity, it is activity that guides. So, the influence of the external situation, just as the influence of the environment in general, is not determined each time by the environment itself, and not by the subject, taken in their abstract, external relation to one another, *but also not in the experiencing* of the subject, but rather specifically in the content of his activity. Consequently, it is in activity and not in social experience that the true unity of the subject and his reality, personality, and environment is realized.

Experiencing lacks its own movement. Only the unity of activity and experience, and not experience as such, contains the internal driving force of the

psychological development of man. *Experiencing is only a form relating to rich human activity.*

Of course, we are far from believing that the concept of experiencing is an empty concept. On the contrary, we believe that this concept, along with the concept of meaning, as well as numerous other concepts introduced into Soviet psychology by Vygotsky, truly enrich it and bring an essential vitality and concreteness to our psychological analysis. It would be crude nihilism to simply discard the beneficial content that they represent. These concepts must be introduced into psychology, but they absolutely must be introduced differently from the way that Vygotsky did. Each concrete proposition, each fact lying at their basis, must first be critically refined and interpreted from the position of a coherent materialistic psychological theory.

Notes

1. At the Interagency Pedological Planning Conference of 1929, the objectives of pedological study of the environment were formulated in A.B. Zalkind's keynote speech in the following way:

(1) In light of the fact that scientific analysis of elements of the external environment is now only beginning to unfold—and in this area nothing has yet been formulated—it is necessary to start from the fundamentals: with the establishment of *classifications* of environments as a basis, in accordance with social-class elements and their constituents; (2) it is essential that an exact, objective method for studying the individual elements of the environment be devised; (3) it is especially important to study the makeup of certain class environments surrounding large groups of children; the proletarian and peasant environment in various oblasts of the Soviet Union and in various industrial environments, the environments of national minorities, and so forth. The order of social importance should be determined for the various raions, various types of industries (metal workers, etc.), various types of peasant populations (poor peasants, farm hands, kolkhoz collective workers, average peasants, etc.); (4) the organization of the pedagogical environment should be analyzed, first of all the school, preschool, extracurricular environments; the day-care environment; the kindergarten environment, and so on; the Pioneer troop as an environment; the factory as an educational environment, and so on; (5) a basic indication of the environmental norms necessary for the pedagogical process should be provided.

As we see, the investigative scheme given above just makes these “theoretical” demands concrete.

2. L.S. Vygotsky [Vygotskii], *The Pedology of School Age* [Pedologiya shkol'nogo vozrasta] (Moscow: Bureau of Correspondence Education of the 2d MGU, 1928), pp. 20–21.

3. L.S. Vygotsky, *Foundations of Pedology* [Osnovy pedagogii] (Moscow: 2d Moscow Medical Institute Press, 1934), beginning on p. 89.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

7. L.S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Speech* [Myshlenie i rech'] (Moscow, Leningrad: Sotsekgiz, 1934), chs. 5 and 6.

8. K. Marx [Marks] and F. Engels [Engel's], *German Ideology* [Nemetskaia ideologiya], *Collected Works* [Sobr. soch.], vol. 4 (Moscow, 1932), p. 20.

9. We provide a similar critical analysis of this difference in a special article about knowledge acquisition in students. *Kharkov Institute of Scientific Pedagogy, Acad. Press*, vol. 2 (in press). [See A.N. Leontiev, *Stanovlenie psikhologii deiatel'nosti: rannie raboty* (Moscow: Smysl, 2003), pp. 316–50.]*

10. *Thought and Speech*, p. 247.

11. *Foundations of Pedology*, beginning on p. 118.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11; emphasis added.

14. E. Durkheim, *Sociology and the Theory of Knowledge* [Sotsiologiya i teoriia poznaniia]. Cited from the Russian translation in the collection, *New Ideas in Sociology* [Novye idei v sotsiologii] (St. Petersburg, 1914), pp. 47–48. Compare works of De Roberti and D. Drozhisko appearing in the same volume. In the latest specifically psychological essays these false views are expressed in P. Janet's "L'évolution de la mémoire," "Études sur l'évolution psychique," and in M. Halbwachs, "Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire"; the latter exerted a decisive influence on a book by the author: A.N. Leontiev, *The Development of Memory* [Razvitie pamiati] (Moscow, 1931).

15. *Foundations of Pedology*, p. 119; emphasis added.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

17. Of course the fact that the child also enters into *direct* relations with people around him independent of this does not change anything—after all, we are simply talking about this *specific* relationship.

*Not translated here.—Ed.