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The Dialogical concept of consciousness in L.S. Vygotsky and G.H. Mead and its relevance for contemporary discussions on consciousness

In my paper I show the relevance of cultural-activity theory for solving the puzzles of the concept of consciousness which encounter contemporary philosophy. I reconstruct the main categories of cultural-activity theory as developed by M.M. Bakhtin, L.S. Vygotsky, G.H. Mead, and J. Dewey. For the concept of consciousness the most important thing is that the phenomenon of human consciousness is considered to be an effect of intersection of language, social relations, and activity. Therefore consciousness cannot be reduced to merely sensual experience but it has to be treated as a complex process in which experience is converted into language expressions which in turn are used for establishing interpersonal relationships. Consciousness thus can be accounted for by its reference to objectivity of social relationships rather than to the world of physical or biological phenomena.

Keywords: *consciousness, dialogue, activity theory, cultural concept of consciousness, mind-body problem*

In one of the most famous paragraphs in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein poses a question "...if a lion could speak, we could not understand him" (Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 190). This remark is also one of the most puzzling and the most commented observations in this book. Language, consciousness, and activity seem to be connected, but it is not easy to disentangle their relation. The puzzle of Wittgenstein's remark is a sign of the difficulties which contemporary philosophy approaches the problem of consciousness. My intention is to show that the founders of cultural-activity theory can be helpful in solving at least some of the dilemmas of consciousness which haunt philosophers.

The problem of consciousness, which was always one of the crucial issues of philosophy and psychology, has recently received new attention in the light of genetic and neuropsychological discoveries with so deep extension as to quantum theory. However, from philosophical point of view it is clear to all parties participating in the discussion on the nature of consciousness that in fact we have kind of revived the old "classic" standpoints in the long controversy starting from ancient Greek philosophy and ordered in clear perspectives in the 17th and 18th century along with the rise of modern philosophy of the mind. Descartes and Spinoza, and French materialists set the tone continue to use when

discussing the problem of consciousness.

Even if some thinkers try to avoid accepting the necessity to choose between "dualism" (parallelism) and materialism, they have to cling anyway to at least a version of either category. For instance, John Searle in his book on consciousness confesses: "I believe the urge to reductionism and materialism derives from the underlying mistake of supposing that if we accept consciousness as having its own real existence, we will somehow be accepting dualism and rejecting the scientific worldview. If there is one theme that runs throughout this book it is: consciousness is a natural biological phenomenon. It is as much a part of our biological life as digestion, growth, or photosynthesis" (Searle, 1997, p. xiii). He has thus to get into polemics with those who believe that consciousness is more about experience than biology.

A good example is David Chalmers' concept of consciousness where he proposes an independent concept of experience arguing that "...we will take experience itself as a fundamental feature of the world, alongside mass, charge, and space-time. If we take experience as fundamental, then we can go about the business of constructing theory of experience" (Chalmers, 1995, p. 210). Chalmers of course has to accept a kind of dualism, but he ensures that "... it is an innocent version of dualism, entirely compatible

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with the scientific view of the world” (Chalmers, 1995, p. 210). This compatibility consists of the fact that we can obtain a theory of experience and at some point link such a theory to physical theory. For completing this task, theory of experience is crucial as experience is obviously different from any physical object. Chalmers thus states: “There is an obvious problem that plagues the development of a theory of consciousness, and that is the paucity of objective data. Conscious experience is not directly observable in an experimental context, so we cannot generate data about the relationship between physical process and experience at will. Nevertheless, we all have access to a rich source of data in our own case. Many important regularities between experience and processing can be inferred from considerations about one’s experience. There are also good indirect sources of data from observable cases, as when one relies on the verbal report of subject as an indication of experience. These methods have their limitations, but we have more than enough data to get a theory off the ground” (Chalmers, 1995, p. 211).

These two examples of theory of consciousness show that the discussion on this phenomenon still in fact repeats the old dilemma of materialism and dualism, especially as these two standpoints were developed at the end of the 19th c and in the first three decades of the 20th c. I believe that the origin of cultural-activity theory was connected with overcoming the difficulties of the then existing versions of dualism and materialism. L. S. Vygotsky and G.H. Mead believe that it is possible to maintain the objective standpoint in psychology and still accept the existence of the subjective states of mind. From a methodological point of view, they can be easily compared with the contemporary theories of consciousness that also seek objective correlates of consciousness or even try to explain its features by reducing its more “hard” facts of natural sciences. However, the founders of cultural-activity theory focus on different kinds of objectivity: objectivity of language, activity, interactions, and culture. In these spheres they look for an explanation of consciousness. I think that in the works of these thinkers, we can find at least an outline of the concept of consciousness that can be enriched by referring to their intellectual environment: in the case of Mead, John Dewey’s ideas are the most important, while understanding L.S. Vygotsky’s conceptions, some achievements of Russian semiotics - especially those of M.M. Bakhtin - are of special significance. Although it is hardly possible to speak of a coherent theory of consciousness developed by the founders of the cultural-activity theory, one cannot believe that they formulate some points of departure which could be useful for making an intervention in the recent controversies in this field.

I think that at least three types of such a contribution can be enumerated. First, the insights from the cultural-activity theory reveals almost entirely neglected spheres of language

and social interactions. Second, they allow the bridging of the two tendencies in consciousness research. Besides this trend I have described at the beginning of my paper, there is a powerful tradition of investigating links to Freudian heritage where Lacanian ideas seem to be of the greatest importance. His idea of the close connection between unconsciousness, consciousness, and language were presented in the early works of Bakhtin on Freudianism. Third, the originators of the cultural-activity theory show the complicated relationships between activity, sensations, and higher mental functions, including language. However, I think that these ideas should be reconstructed from different and scattered works which is not an easy task. It is also a difficult task for the reason that these people who I count as the founders of the cultural-activity theory, such as L.S. Vygotsky, G.H. Mead, M. M Bakhtin, and to some extent J. Dewey, used diverse conceptual languages and often were interested in different domains of the social sciences. Therefore, I can offer here solely a reconstruction of the main categories as they are used by these theoreticians and their provisional integration into what I call the “dialogical concept of consciousness”.

This notion of consciousness nevertheless demands a different concept of objectivity than is currently taken for granted in analytic philosophy. In this paradigm, objectivity is associated solely with a scientific naturalistic approach which nowadays takes the form borrowed from different sciences. In the case of consciousness, the war is waged between the proponents of the physical paradigm and the biological paradigm, including as doubtful a science as evolutionary psychology. The founders of cultural-activity theory have been aware that for psychology we need a special kind of objectivity that can encompass the natural side of psychic life, as well as higher mental functions.

In L.S. Vygotsky’s late treatise on Descartes’ and Spinoza’s teachings on emotions, he tries to solve the fundamental question of subjective (descriptive) and objective (explanatory) psychology; that is, he is involved precisely in the discussion of what contemporary philosophers call the relationship between first and third person approaches to mental states. Vygotsky seeks in Spinoza’s philosophy an inspiration for overcoming the discrepancy between emotions understood as an expression of the higher mental functions and emotions comprehended as a result of biological mechanisms. “Spiritual and sensual love arise, each from its source: the first, from the free, cognitive need of soul, and the second, from the nourishment needs of embryonal life. Their connection is so unclear that we understand much more plainly their initial separateness than their short-term coming together and communication. Since spiritual and sensual passions differ sharply from each other, naturally they must become the subject of two completely different kinds of scientific knowledge. The first must be studied as manifestations

of independent, free spiritual activity, the second, as manifestations of human automatism subject to the law of mechanics. In this, the idea of the separation of explanatory and descriptive psychology of emotions is fully contained, an idea that is assumed by Cartesian teaching with the same inevitability with which the Spinozist teaching on passions assumes the opposite, specifically the unity of explanatory and descriptive psychology” (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 223). Although this monograph has never been finished, he clearly points to Spinoza’s thought as a source of inspiration for a solution to the problem of objective explanation of consciousness. However, it would be rather odd if he would accept Spinozian pan-psychism without any reservation. He has been under the influence of the Spinozian interpretation of Marxism originated by Georgi Plekhanov and propagated in the USSR by Abram Deborin, but of course he has to find a reality which could be used as a point of departure for building such objectivity. I think that such a reality is the objective world of culture crystallized in language and embodied in activity.

In this task, he was to some extent in accordance with M.M. Bakhtin whose book on Freudianism contains the main motives of the dialogical and social notion of consciousness in relatively rudimentary form¹. Starting from the obvious paradox of psychological research that psychological phenomena are at the same time of subjective (first person) and objective characters (third person), he argues that the only way of overcoming this contradiction is to substitute verbal correlates for sensations. “...if we in psychological experiment put ‘verbal equivalent’ (outer and inner speech or only inner) in the place of ‘inner sensation’, then we can save unity and continuity of material experience” (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 18). Then in fact the problem of consciousness becomes a problem of language and of different usages of language. The main objection against Freudianism is that it abandons language and focuses instead on the subjective world of an individual. “...psychoanalysis continues to be faithful to the standpoint of inner experience” (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 72).

Bakhtin insists that what Freud takes as the struggle of motives is in reality an effect of the very complicated social situation of therapy. A therapist and a patient create a social event in which both sides have their particular interests. In general, Bakhtin writes that “...no one utterance can be ascribed merely solely to a speaker: it – a product of reciprocal activity of speakers, and broader – a product of totality of this complicated social situation in frame of which an utterance emerges” (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 78).

1 This book *Freudianism* [Frejdysm] was published under the name of Bakhtin’s disciple V.N. Voloshynov. I use the original Russian version published by Labyrinth in the series “Bakhtin pod maskoj” (Bakhtin under the mask) in 1993 with the commentaries by W. Makhlin. All translations are mine.

Here we have at least two main points of the dialogical concept of consciousness. First, the idea that any psychological sensation has to take a form of language; and second, that any utterance is a product of a complicated social situation. Therefore, one can state that the objectivity of the mind is guaranteed by the objectivity of language, which in turn is assured by the objectivity of the social world and culture. Contradictions in psychic life are consequences of tensions in a social world, for example, unconsciousness is “unofficial consciousness” which is rejected by an “official consciousness” of an individual and for this reason cannot be represented in its conscious psychic life. However, as the commentator notices, Bakhtin himself never developed these intuitions in psychology; he turned to literature and employed the term “unofficial culture” brilliantly in his Rabelais book².

For the development of the idea of consciousness from dialogical point of view, Bakhtin’s concept of language as an ideology is too broad. In “Philosophy of the Act”, he insists on the sharp distinction between the world of objective culture and the world of action. Psychology constructs its idea of the self in the first of these worlds. Psychology creates very abstract theoretical constructions, which can be compared only with other theoretical constructions. It is not able to understand the complicated relationship between the world of deed and the world of objective culture. The self as a psychic being is a result of abstracting mental elements from once-occurrent Being. Bakhtin generalizes his considerations as follows: “The world as a content of scientific thinking is a distinctive world: it is an autonomous world, yet not a detached world, but rather a world that is incorporated into the unitary and once-occurrent event of Being through the mediation of an answerable consciousness in an actual deed. But that once-occurrent event of Being is no longer something that is thought of, but something that *is*, something that is being actually and inescapably accomplished through me and others (accomplished, *inter alia*, also in my deed of cognizing); it is actually experienced, affirmed in an emotional-volitional manner, and cognition constitutes merely a moment in this experiencing-affirming...All of theoretical reason in its entirety is only a moment of practical reason, i.e. the reason of the unique *subiectum*’s moral orientation within the event of once-occurrent Being” (Bakhtin, 1993, pp. 12-13). Therefore *any* kind of abstraction can become a part of the self only insofar as it finds its expression in moral activity.

But for psychology, the task of overcoming this apparently unbreakable obstacle is of the highest importance. I think that both L.S. Vygotsky and G.H. Mead, each of them in his own theoretical language, take on the challenge which was at their time posed by the distinction between explanatory and descriptive psychology. On the

2 See Makhlin’s footnote to p. 84, p. 117.

one hand, they had to confront behaviorism with its idea of the reduction of all psychological functions to biologically understand activity; but on the other hand, they did not dismiss the idea of autonomy of human self and the independent existence of psychological phenomena. So I believe that their common purpose was to invent a unified scheme of explanation which could account for higher mental phenomena, as well as for elementary psychological occurrences from sensation to action. Both were under the influence of Hegelian philosophy with its idea of mediation and the dependence of an individual on the spirit of history. Both at some point tried to correct these Hegelian dialectics by introducing the elements of the natural sciences. This combination of metaphysical assumptions and empirical findings is, in my opinion, the most valuable part of their methodological approach. However, rejecting the Hegelian concept of Spirit would have to lead to finding a new substance which would play a similar role in their system. I think that both thinkers in this respect shift between objective reality of culture and activity (Kozulin, 1990, pp. 120-121).

Objective instances of culture remain for them the main point of reference for the concrete activity of an individual. For Vygotsky, they took the forms of scientific concepts and objective situation, which is a frame for the interaction between a child and an adult. G.H. Mead uses the category "biological process" for the frame of interactions at the level of biological organism and "social process" for communications at the level of conscious human being. For both thinkers, these objective instances of culture play a role of *a priori* framework which encompasses all individual human interactions. They can be compared with Kantian categories which enable people to construct knowledge but in themselves they are empty, therefore they have to be fulfilled by human interactions and human activity. Although Mead and Vygotsky obviously have been under the influence of Hegel, I think that there is an implicit Kantian motif in their work which can be explained by the prevalence of the neo-Kantian philosophy of their time. Of course they had to adopt Kantian categories to psychology and show that in the case of psychology these schemas are necessary conditions for building a unified model of explanation, including both biological endowment and higher mental function.

For both Vygotsky and Mead, consciousness emerges from behavior and human interactions. Therefore it is not a separate substance or natural phenomenon, but rather a derivative of our social behavior. To some extent both develop the famous notion of consciousness as given by William James in his paper "Does Consciousness Exist?", however substituted Jamesian concept of consciousness as existing in the world with concrete social relationships and their meaning for the emergence of consciousness. In his paper on consciousness, Vygotsky states: "I am conscious

of myself only to the extent that I am another to myself, i.e. to the extent that I can again perceive my own reflexes as stimuli. In principle there is no difference in mechanism whatsoever between the fact that I can repeat aloud a word spoken silently and the fact that I can repeat a word spoken by another: both are reversible reflex-stimuli" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 77).

This idea resonates with G.H. Mead's notion of "taking the role of the other". An individual relates to its own activity in the same way as to other people's activity, or, in other words, it is able to provide stimuli to its own behavior. At this moment, a division into the subject and object of behavior disappears and an individual is both. However, for this unity to exist, a social process and mutual relations among people are necessary. Hence, we finally arrive at a three-part scheme: meaning as objective relations among organisms; assuming the attitude of the other, i.e. viewing oneself from an external position (the self); and, eventually, incorporating realized meanings (meaningful symbols) into the action (mind).

For Vygotsky, the confrontation of the full meaning of a word (concept) with an actual child's abilities is a basic mechanism of development. An objective situation - which sets and is a framework for the rules of interaction can be, identified to a high degree with meaning; since it works through imposing sense in particular behaviors. Objectivity of existence and the examination of the mind are justified by the fact that cultural structures are at the same time internal and external to the subject. The cultural reacts to biological structures of an organism, transforming them in such a way that a totality can achieve a level determined by the most "developed" cultural structure i.e. the scientific concepts. It is speech that is an instrument enabling the realization of this task. Both thinking and interactions are supposed to take place at the preverbal level, but then one does not trigger the mechanism of development leading to abstract thinking, and thus, to the creation of the self. The cognitive meaning of interactions and pre-verbal actions, though not devoid of an implicit conceptual content, do not comprise the contradictions which are given in the meaning of a word. Word represents, on the one hand, a concept, while on the other, it can be an instrument of action and co-operation at the level which is possible at a particular stage in the development of mental structures. Thus, there emerges a conflict between a concept and its empirical realization. For Vygotsky, this conflict is the basis for the development of concepts, and by the same token, for the development of mental structures; eventually leading to the emergence of self-awareness and the separation of an individual as the self. Interpreted this way, Vygotsky's theory can be located within the interactional scheme; yet with a reservation that interactions are preceded by cognitive structures which exist in people's minds as completed schemes of interpretation, and which also objectively exist as social

situations determining directions in acting.

Naturally I would not like to suggest that their conceptions are equal or even equivalent, but I would advocate the idea that they are supplementary. In his speculative psychology, G.H. Mead is preoccupied mainly with the emergence of the self as specific human phenomena whereas L.S. Vygotsky builds up developmental psychology which shows the complications of the ways of forming higher mental function. However, I have decided to abstract from these differences in order to show that their conceptions can form a point of departure for the dialogical notion of consciousness which would be in opposition to the majority of the contemporary views on consciousness.

As I have already emphasized, they propose a unified scheme of explanation of human behavior which could integrate biological endowment into higher mental functions. In other words, they claim that it is possible to form a definite whole from different qualitative elements. In this respect, they can be opposed to dominant theories of human behavior and consciousness in the same degree to these which state that behavior and consciousness is accounted for by a naturalistic scheme of explanation, and to those which claim that these phenomena can be interpreted but not explained. In his paper *Peaceful Coexistence in Psychology*, Charles Taylor (1985) suggests that we should abandon any attempts to seek a unified model of explanation and limit themselves to the acceptance of the inevitability of a dual scheme. The dialogical theory of consciousness would certainly be in opposition to such a claim.

It assumes that social reality, objectified in the world of culture, is a frame which organizes interactions and gives them objectivity. Objectivity of culture is, of course, different from objectivity of nature, but from the point of view of an individual entering the world of culture, the social world this difference is in fact meaningless. She or he has to take for granted both worlds: that of nature and that of culture in order to participate in the world of adults. In this sense, Vygotsky's often questioned thesis of two different roots of higher mental functions seems to be obviously true. As a tool and a sign is a vehicle of transforming the lower functions into higher, more complex, the emerging whole can be analyzed in the relations to a sign and a tool which exist objectively as crystallized and materialized phenomena of the ideal world of culture.

For Mead, biological mechanisms have meanings as a general pattern of an act which undergoes far-reaching modifications, and whose elements can build up entirely different structures. Of biological character, there are also impulses which are the basis for motivation. If we are to relate these interdependencies to the problem of sign creation, then we may also say that a biological character would be patterns of reacting to objects. These patterns undergo remarkable changes at the moment they become elements of the social process. Objects one reacts to are

created in the process of the social interaction. Mead calls the world in which the act is going on "the world that is there". It is the world composed of objects that achieve validity because they can become a basis for a successful act (Mead, 1981, pp. 240-247). Relevance to nature is limited in Mead's conception only to action as a biological fact. It is only in this sense that we can talk of Mead's naturalism. Gestures in themselves, not being a true language, provide a pattern for communication which in a modified form can be detected in significant symbols and meanings³.

Thomas Nagel in his influential paper *What Is Like to Be a Bat* (Nagel, 1980) discusses a question of the possibility of understanding another's state of mind. His example is of a bat. On the one hand, a bat is a mammal, with an obvious biological connection to humankind; however, with very different type of senses (they use a kind of sonar). According to Nagel, a bat is a useful example of the difficulties we encounter when we try to approach the phenomenon of consciousness. One can understand other's experiences only through imagination which bases one's own experience. However "...it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of addition, subtractions, and modification" (Nagel, 1980, p. 161).

I assume that in this passage we encounter a typical reasoning of the problem of consciousness in contemporary philosophy. On the one hand, we have experiences which are beyond the reach of science, and on the other hand, we have the "hard" reality of physical, and to some extent, biological sciences. These two realities can be reduced to each other (physicalism, or the lesser popular panpschism) or separated, and then we have various forms of dualism.

It is interesting that Thomas Nagel seems to come close to dualistic concept of consciousness. At the end of his paper after noticed "At present we are completely unequipped to think about the subjective character of experience without relying on the imagination – without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject. This should be regarded as a challenge to form new concepts and devise a new method – an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy

3 Mead ascribes a special role to the vocal gestures: "We are, especially through the use of the vocal gestures, continually arousing in ourselves those responses which we call out in other persons into our own conduct. The critical importance of language in the development of human experience lies in the fact that the stimulus is one that can react upon the speaking individual as it reacts upon the other". Mind, Self and Society, p.69.

or the imagination” (Nagel, 1980, p. 166).

Answer to this question which we can find in Vygotsky’s work is quite clear. He observes that theory of *Einführung* is wrong in stating that “...we know others insofar as we know ourselves” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 77). In fact it is also Nagel’s point of view, our main obstacle to understanding what is like to be a bat lies in the impossibility for humans to imagine specific experience of bats. Vygotsky contradicts this thesis showing: “In reality it would be more correct to put it the other way around. We are conscious of ourselves because we are conscious of others and by the same method as we are conscious of others, because we are the same vis-à-vis ourselves as we are others are vis-à-vis us” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 77). Of course this concept of consciousness assumes an intimate connection between language, social world, and sensations which is rejected by the majority of analytical philosophers. Thomas Nagel gives for a support of his idea of the new notion of experience a situation of a person blind from birth. “One might try...to develop concepts that could be used to explain to a person blind from birth what it was like to see... it should be possible to devise a method of expressing in objective terms...Any conception alternative to those we learn in the first person may enable us to arrive at a kind of understanding even of our own experience which is denied us by the very easy of description and lack of distance that subjective concepts afford” (Nagel, 1980, p. 166).

L.S. Vygotsky observes in his paper on consciousness that the development of speech in deaf-mutes and the development of tactile reactions in blind persons confirms the thesis that consciousness is closely connected to the development of speech and social interactions. He writes: “...the most remarkable thing is that *conscious awareness of speech and social experience emerge simultaneously and completely in parallel*...The deaf-mute learns to become conscious of himself and his movements to the extent he learns to become conscious of others” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 78).

This close relationship between language and consciousness deals also with imagination which ceases to be merely an extension of our sensation but becomes very complicated phenomenon of the intersection of sensation and knowledge. In New York Times of 16 of September 2008 there is a paper on the winners of Lasker Medical Prizes. One of them Stanley Falkow “...was honored for

his discoveries that grew out of an extraordinary ability to imagine himself as a bacterium so he could view the world from the microbiological perspective” (Altman, 2008). It is hardly possible that this “extraordinary ability” could emerge just from intensifying sensations of normal human being. It is a complex experience which grows out of the deep knowledge of microbiological world, the ways how bacterium acts, and capacity to transfer such a knowledge into intuitive experience of what is like to be a bacterium.

The dialogical concept of consciousness is directed at overcoming this vicious circle of philosophy, but of course at a price of changing the question. We cannot understand what it is like to be a bat unless a bat is a part of our shared enterprise. A lion can speak but we do not understand him unless he cooperates with us and uses the same tools.

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