

The Socio-historical Project and the Philosophy of Education

The Formation of Reason, by David Bakhurst, Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2011, 186pp, \$29.90 (paper).

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David Bakhurst is best known for his writing on Soviet philosophy and in particular for his advocacy of Evald Ilyenkov who became, largely as a result of Bakhurst's work, widely known outside the circle of those who follow Soviet philosophy. In this work, Bakhurst ventures deeply into Anglo-American philosophy of mind in the analytical tradition. This is an important effort in the project of bringing Vygotskian ideas into the mainstream in the English-speaking world in particular.

The aim of this exploration of the philosophy of mind is to expound a socio-historical conception of mind which can underpin the philosophy of education while arguing that "education, broadly conceived, should no longer be neglected by philosophical enquiries into the character of the human condition." But Bakhurst is also continuing his earlier work in advocating for Soviet philosophy. There is only so much that can be done by simply promoting the merits of an idea. If mainstream, Anglo-American analytical science is to be convinced that it is worthwhile overcoming the barriers to understanding Soviet philosophy, then we have to tackle *its* problems, with its own standards of enquiry and idiom of discussion, using what has been learnt from Vygotsky and Ilyenkov, and this is what Bakhurst does.

And analytical science urgently needs to overcome the barriers to understanding the socio-historical formation of mind as well. Robert Brandom, a philosopher who places himself squarely in the Anglo-American tradition of analytical philosophy remarked that "We analytic philosophers have signally failed our colleagues in cognitive science. We have done that by not sharing central lessons about the nature of concepts, concept use, and conceptual content that have been entrusted to our care and feeding for more than a century" (2009: 197), with the result that cognitive psychology has signally failed to build a viable psychology of concepts.

Brandom offers a pragmatist approach to the formation of reason based on "the game of giving and asking of reasons." Bakhurst examines Brandom's work in this book, but finds it wanting, both because of what he takes to be the one-sidedness of Brandom's rejection of representationalism in favour of inferentialism, and for his abandonment of external reality as a criterion of knowledge in favour of an *absolute* reliance on linguistic interactions.

Bakhurst deals with a number of mainly British philosophers, but it is John McDowell that emerges as his principal protagonist. McDowell is a South African born Anglo-American philosopher of mind who has departed so far from the centre of gravity of this current that he comes close to the same conclusions as Ilyenkov. That a representative of analytical philosophy should come close to the philosophical positions underlying Activity Theory and Cultural Psychology is very good news. And it is this convergence that Bakhurst aims to further. In the end, he identifies just two significant points of difference between Ilyenkov and McDowell, and Bakhurst seeks to negotiate an agreement. He asks supporters of McDowell to "take even more seriously the idea of the normative character of reality," and supporters of Ilyenkov to abandon the reliance on activity as the sole foundation of a theory of mind. Ilyenkov, he says, must "upholding the idea that that reality itself is a normative space, that the world we confront presents us with reasons for belief and action ... what we do is in part a function of what we make of ourselves in active dialogue with the world."

But it seems to this writer that Bakhurst is selling Ilyenkov short here. As a Marxist, Ilyenkov does not regard activity as "unencumbered spontaneity" but rather, using an aphorism of Marx, Ilyenkov says: "Man does not act on nature from outside, but 'confronts nature as one of her own forces'" (2009: 166) – activity is constrained by nature, as well as purposive, not the "unencumbered spontaneity" Bakhurst imputes to Ilyenkov.

Bakhurst compares the view of McDowell and Vygotsky on concepts, and here he finds that McDowell and Vygotsky are not on the same wavelength. McDowell, like all other philosophers of mind know only of concepts, not the qualitatively different kinds of concept which arise in the course of development which Vygotsky discloses. Bakhurst believes though that the two thinkers can be reconciled because the differences simply reflect the different focus of their work.

The *Leitmotif* of the book and the central idea which is recommended as an end and ideal for education, is *Bildung*. *Bildung* is one of those German words for which there is no English translation. It means not just education, but cultivation, with the connotation of appropriating the culture of one's time so as to become a self-determining individual sharing in responsibility for the maintenance of the culture of the community. To acquire *Bildung* means to become free, not so much by having choices, but by knowing what one *must* do by acts of self-determination.

There is a lot of highly nuanced discussion of the notion of freedom, which means paradoxically, that we have to be able to determine our own thoughts and beliefs. Upon investigation the idea of 'deciding what to think' turns out to be a very problematic notion; after all, it is the evidence which causes you to believe or not to believe, and once you are given cause to believe a certain view one simply cannot un-believe it. But in the end, Bakhurst shows that being able to determine one's own thinking is not only possible but the essential ingredient of freedom.

There is one remarkable chapter, in which Bakhurst aims to refute accusations of 'rationalism', that is, an emphasis on logical reasoning at the expense of other modes of thinking and acting. Here Bakhurst dwells on some surprising aspects of thinking: the deliberate solving of problems in one's sleep, the ability to elaborate complex ideas 'on one's feet' without rehearsal, the modulation of thinking according to mood, the ability to perform, respond to and appreciate music in ways which are intellectual but bypass recourse to words. This remarkable passage gives cause to reflect on simplistic logocentric conceptions of conceptual thought, but within the context of this dialogue with analytical philosophy, Bakhurst is not able to go anywhere with these provocative observations.

The whole range of problems of the philosophy of mind are reviewed: relativism, the social construction of reality, nature *vs.* nurture, brain *vs.* person, the inaccessibility of inner states, identity and identity-formation, human freedom, mutual recognition, and so on. All these topics are covered with care and precision, but without making any presumption about the reader's acquaintance with the literature.

Bakhurst notes in conclusion that the "success of the socio-historical project will depend ultimately on whether it is consistent with genuinely empirical theories of mind and its development." (p. 157) But Brandom's words quoted above also remind us that there is no chance of any such empirical theory of mind succeeding in the absence of adequate philosophical foundations. Bakhurst believes, and I agree, that the socio-historical current of philosophy represented by Ilyenkov and Vygotsky does indeed have the required philosophical foundation. But the intricate, demanding and rigorous attention to philosophical nuance which is demanded in the Anglo-American tradition of analytical philosophy (often missing the forest for the trees) is necessary if Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory is to break into the mainstream and make the kind of transformations of education systems that justice urgently requires.

References

Ilyenkov, E V., (2009) *Ideals in Human Activity*. , Pacifica Ca.: Marxists Internet Archive Publications.

Brandom, Robert B. (2009) *Reason in Philosophy. Animating Ideas*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.