

Leontyev's Activity Theory and Social Theory

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A.N. Leontyev, the younger of L.S. Vygotsky's closest colleagues, is widely recognised as the founder of activity theory. In the following review of Leontyev's activity theory, I have called upon the insights of his most well-known successors – his son A.A. Leontyev and grandson Dmitry, Fedor Vasilyuk, and Victor Kaptelinin – lest it be thought that the criticisms that follow are mine alone. I still count myself as an activity theorist.

A.N. Leontyev's creative work was conducted in the Soviet Union under Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev, a period during which every aspect of life was controlled by the Leader and in which normal conditions of human social life were absent and open scientific debate was impossible. In 1966, he became the first ever (!) Dean of Psychology at Moscow State University, where he worked until his death in 1979. He was the most influential of the distinctive current of Soviet Psychology. It is impossible to overestimate the crushing effect of this environment on scientific creativity in the human sciences. It is therefore a matter of great significance that Leontyev made a number of unique discoveries in both the form and the content of psychological science.

Vygotsky had approached the cultural formation of the mind in terms of how artefacts, including language, which originate in a wider culture, are used by individuals to resolve situations, which are also the product of the wider culture. He did not, however, investigate how these situations and a person's motivation, a key element in constituting situations, originate in the social environment itself. This issue was taken up A.N. Leontyev.

Vygotsky had recognised 'activity' (i.e., social practice) as the *substance* of psychology, its most fundamental, irreducible category. Vygotsky had identified the ('molecular') *units* of activity – the smallest units of social life: *artefact-mediated actions*. But an artefact-mediated action cannot be understood in isolation. Actions make sense only in the context of a whole series of actions by an individual and the interrelated actions of other individuals. To extend the theory so as to understand the individual's situation as part of a wider community and its motivation, it was necessary to determine a 'molar' unit of activity – a meaningful aggregate of artefact-mediated actions, whose internal unity would reveal the motivation for individual actions. The psychological investigation of *activities* was Leontyev's project.

Leontyev's psychology led directly to an approach to social theory, and he did not shy from taking activity theory into that domain, but Leontyev always remained a psychologist and despite the great potential of the framework he provided, his contributions to social theory were fatuous.

Part 1. Objects and activities in Leontyev's activity theory

Leontyev genetically reconstructed Vygotsky's concept of an action as follows. He began his analysis by considering an organism whose behaviour is directly controlled and motivated by the object (see 'On the Concept of Object' in this volume) of its activity, the organism's perception of the object being internally linked by nervous reflexes to the processes driving its activity. In the course of evolution, forms of behaviour develop so as to be 'portable' and adapt to conditions, and these he calls 'operations'. Although not completely stereotyped, operations are not consciously controlled by the organism. Operations are controlled by the conditions. Through evolution, more elaborate forms of behaviour develop which entail a chain of operations to achieve an object and these 'chains of operations' are called 'actions'. At this stage, the goal of an action is identical to its motive (its object). So, an action is controlled by its object, which meets some need of the organism. All the operations making up the action are motivated by the same object which is achieved only by the

complete action. So long as everything goes smoothly, the component operations are regulated by the conditions without conscious control. If an operation goes awry, then it springs back into awareness and is consciously controlled until equanimity is recovered. An operation is not 'unconscious' like the heart-beat, but once mastered, it is done without conscious awareness.

More elaborate forms of behaviour entail a whole series of actions, each achieved by accomplishing an intermediate *goal*, and motivated to attain the same object. Thus the immediate goal of each action is no longer identical to its motive. And this is the definition of a fully developed action – *a form of behaviour the motive for which is not identical to its goal*. An action is done for a reason, so to speak. This is a profound and important insight.

Once behaviour has evolved to this point, social creatures utilise a division of labour to achieve their objects by dividing actions between different members of the group. These aggregates of actions are called 'activities'. An individual can execute a chain of actions each achieving an intermediate goal while constantly having the motive of the activity in mind. But when these intermediate goals are divided up according to a social division of labour, then 'motive', being a *psychological* category, is not an appropriate term for the object of an activity, because it does not act as the really effective motive of each individual's actions, even though the object of the activity is *understood*. The 'motive' of the activity is achievement of its *object* and object is now a social category, and only indirectly a psychological category. The object is achieved by *social regulation* of the actions of the various participants. The object of an activity is implicit in the activity, and is represented in the psyche of an individual in the *personal sense* of the activity, in general quite different from the object which analysis can show is driving the activity as a whole.

Thus Leontyev defined a three-level 'macrostructure' of activity – operations, actions and activities – each representing activity at a different level of analytical abstraction.

Problems in Leontyev's conception of 'activity'

Leontyev defined the molar unit of activity, 'an activity' as follows:

Thus, the principal 'unit' of a vital process is an organism's activity; the different activities that realise its diverse vital relations with the surrounding reality are essentially determined by their object (*predmet*); we shall therefore differentiate between separate types of activity according to the difference in their objects.

1978, p. 29

(1) Within this English translation of Leontyev's Russian there are two points of confusion.* The Russian language does not use articles such as 'an' or 'the'. English, on the other hand, uses articles, and moreover nouns may be used with or without articles, and have different meanings accordingly. In general, when an English noun is used with an article or in the plural, it is a *countable* noun; when an English noun is used in the singular without an article, it is a *mass* noun. So 'an activity' and 'activities' are countable nouns and 'activity' is a mass noun. A unit is *essentially* a countable noun, so "an organism's activity" in the above excerpt must mean "the activities of the organism," but the excerpt, like so much written about activity in translation from the Russian, seems to be saying: "Activity is the unit of activity," which is a senseless statement. All living organisms engage in activity, but only humans, and maybe some higher mammals, are capable of 'activities'.

* There are, as the reader will see, a host of points of terminological confusion in this area. I have tried so far as possible to retain the terminology found in English translations of the Soviet writers. Where appropriate, I have noted points of confusion. Only in the last instance have I replaced the original terms with my own, because it is part of the purpose of writing this article to facilitate the reader in reading the classics of activity theory for themselves.

(2) *An activity* is an aggregate of actions which combine to achieve a shared object. In the quote, Leontyev tell us that “we shall therefore differentiate between separate types of activity according to the difference in their objects.” But the leap from activities to *types* of activity masks a further elision, and this time the confusion lies with Leontyev himself. As is confirmed by Kaptelinin (2005), when Leontyev says ‘an activity’ he often means ‘a type of activity’. If I say “He was motivated by his work,” that seems to be a clear explanation of the person’s actions. But not so. To understand the content of an action one must know what the person’s work is and what their role is at work. So to make sense of a person’s actions and its motivation, we must take ‘an activity’ to be the *specific* activity, not a general *type* of activity.

According to his son, A.A. Leontyev (2006), Leontyev remained vague about the concept of ‘unit’:

Throughout, even within the framework of activity theory itself, an ambiguous understanding of the units and levels of activity organisation can be seen. ... As is well known, A.N. Leontyev does not provide an explicit definition of it; as a rule, he puts the term ‘unit’ within quotation marks, and in so doing, ‘determines’ it. And this is justified: after all, as it applies to his point of view, the concept of unit has little applicability to activity, action, or operation, since it presumes their *discrete* nature. ... In A.N. Leontyev’s conception, the only thing that can be called a ‘unit’ in the strict sense is [an] activity (an activity act).

Leontyev, 2006, pp. 30, 32; [an] inserted by AB

According to Fedor Vasilyuk (1984, p. 84-5), a Soviet continuator of Leontyev’s work, Leontyev used in fact two distinct concepts of activity: “when life is viewed in a non-individualised manner, as abstract ‘human life in general’ ... the word ‘unit’ has to be understood simply as ‘a part’,” but as his focus moved from life in general to analysis of the motivation of individual persons, ‘activity’ moved from the ‘mass’ to the ‘countable’ meaning of specific activities.

Motivation

But further than this, to make sense of a person’s actions, in a workplace for example, you have to know what *concept* the person *themselves* has of their job: “that actual need is always a need of something, that at the psychological level needs are mediated by psychic reflection” (1978, p. 161)*. If a worker carried out their task incorrectly this could be because they only cared about collecting their wage and so did a sloppy job, or they may have taken too long over the task because they wanted to deliver a good service rather than do it quickly, as required by the profit motive. People have different concepts of the activity in which they are engaged. Leontyev deals with this under the concept of the ‘personal sense’ of the object of the activity. It seems that for Leontyev the object is implicit in the social arrangements made for the activity, which are objective. The object has a ‘personal sense’ though, according to what the object means for the individual. This *reification* of the object of activity is a problem with Leontyev’s elaboration of activity theory.

Vasilyuk argues, and I agree, that a person’s actions cannot be motivated by the object itself, as Leontyev says, but only by the concept the subject has of the object. Leontyev’s method of genetic derivation of his concepts meant that he began from the activity of primitive organisms as part of their ‘lived-world’. Tracing this forward he has in mind at all times individuals whose species has co-evolved with their environment. Moving on to human life, Leontyev relies on the fact that the environment, individuals’ needs and the objects of their activity have all *historically evolved*

* I find it concerning that this prestigious Soviet psychologist relegated to the general category of ‘psychic reflection’ all those aspects of the personality which makes us the kind of person we are. There is no concern as to whether a person is an introvert or extravert, optimist or pessimist, a thinker or a ‘people person’, courageous or cautious. However, these are issues for psychologists, and are incidental to my project.

together, but now as products of human activity. But in human societies, the subject's relation to the objects of their activity is not innate. It is socially constructed and *learned* by individuals, and internalised in the form of concepts. These concepts originate as objects of activities in the past, and are provided to the individual by the given culture and specific social layer in which the subject is raised, by means of language and technical systems. Psychologically, according to Vasilyuk, the subject's environment is not a world of things but of culturally produced concepts, a 'life-world'. This is consistent with the Hegelian concept of a 'formation of consciousness' as an integral subject-object.

So Vasilyuk corrects Leontyev by pointing out that it is these culturally and historically produced concepts which, once acquired by a person, motivate their actions. However, Leontyev retained the ontology where he began with single-cell organisms. Vasilyuk argues that for Leontyev:

An object [*predmet*] is thus not simply a thing lying outside the life circuit of the subject, but a thing already absorbed into the subject's being, which has become an essential feature of that being, has been subjectivised by the life process even before any special appropriation (cognitive, exploratory, informational, etc.) takes place.

Vasilyuk, p. 89

But Vasilyuk argued *against* the claim that it is the concept of the object that a person forms by 'psychic reflection' and not the object itself which motivates a person's actions by claiming that such a view is based on "the model of ... the goal-directed, voluntary, conscious activity of a human adult" (p. 88) but:

... the everyday 'obvious fact' of a living creature existing separately from the world cannot serve as an ontological base-point, because nowhere do we find a living creature before and outside of its interconnections with the world. It is from the first 'implanted into' the world, linked with it by the material navel cord of its own life. This world, while still an objective, material entity, is not the 'physical world' in the sense which that carries for the science of physics, which studies the interactions of things: this is the lived world. It is the lived world, in fact, which is the sole stimulator and source of content for the creature living in it. That is our primary ontological picture.

Vasilyuk, p. 89

And Vasilyuk continues, arguing that as activities are units of life, so their main constituent cause – the object of the activity – is a *unit of the lived world* (p. 89).

When we start from that and begin to construct a psychological theory, and pick out (abstract) a particular activity as the 'unit of life' for the subject, then the object of that activity appears, in this abstracted form, not in its own self-sufficiency and self-identity, not as a thing representing itself, but as 'a unit' representing the lived world, and it is by virtue of this representative character that the object acquires the status of a motive. To base a psychological theory on the statement that the object is the motive of activity is to start from the conviction that life is ultimately determined by the world.

p. 90

Vasilyuk has corrected Leontyev's ontology by replacing what was effectively a *natural* world with a *culturally figured lifeworld* (c.f. Holland et al, 1998; Bourdieu, 1984). The object of the activity, meaningful only within the context of the activity, a unit of the lifeworld, objective to the individual, remains the object of the individual's activity and consequently the external *cause* of their activity.

For Vasilyuk, individuals have ‘their own’ commitments, whereas for Leontyev individuals join or are assigned to established activities already found in the world, as part of the social division of labour. As a result, Vasilyuk does not confront the difference between the object of the activity and its personal sense for the individual actor. His theory is more narrowly psychological.

Objectivism

For Leontyev, objects in the lifeworld *stimulate* and *determine* activities. This “primary ontological picture” places activities in the subordinate role in a lifeworld in which objects are primary. My response to this is to advocate with Vasilyuk, for a more *thoroughgoing* activity theory, one in which *activities* rather than objects are what is primary, what is given to subject and researcher alike. It is *activities* which create objects, are the source of a person’s concepts of objects, and orient the person’s activity, as opposed to a theory of objective needs ‘stimulating’ activities.

So we come back again to Leontyev’s dualism.^{*} According to Vasilyuk:

An object is not simply a thing lying outside the life-circuit of the subject, but a thing already absorbed into the subject’s being, which has become an essential feature of that being, has been subjectivised by life process even before any special ideal appropriation (cognitive, exploratory, informational, etc.) takes place.

p. 89

So according to Vasilyuk, what Leontyev would call the ‘personal sense’ of the object does not derive from psychic reflection, but arises unreflectively in the subject’s upbringing and life-experience. If a crisis arises in pursuit of this object, then that might be an occasion for reflection on the part of the individual.

But a person forms a concept of the object of an activity through participation in activities. It is activities which are the units of life and both the subjects and the objects of activities are products of those activities. I believe that we should not have a dualism of units, one unit for life and another unit for the world, but just one unit, activities, for the lifeworld.

The object

‘Objective’ indicates the properties of processes and situations, etc., which are not relative to one’s point of view. ‘Subjective’ indicates those features which are dependent on one’s point of view, including but not limited to inner processes of the mind.

Being an ‘object’ is something different from the concept of ‘objective’. The concept of ‘object’ is always a point of confusion. Whatever language you are using, the word for ‘object’ is ambiguous. For Leontyev, the object is a condition in the world which is objective for any individual, and is implicit in social arrangements. In general, Leontyev’s assumption is that an activity is reproducing ‘its’ object within a social formation which is consuming its object and needs to continuously reproduce the same object. Objects are thus part of a process of self-reproduction of the whole social formation, which in turn is sustaining the life of each subject and raising and educating them in preparation for participating in social activities, and providing appropriate motivation for that participation. The object is both the material on which the subject acts and that which constitutes their aim and motivation. In this picture we can see the echo of the organism in its natural habitat.

^{*} In 2014, I attended a lecture at the ISCAR (International Society of Cultural-historical Activity Research) Congress in which the grandson, Dmitry Leontyev, explained ANL’s theory. At the start of the lecture Dmitry drew a line down the centre of the whiteboard, and the subjective went on the left and the objective went on the right. By ‘objective’ he meant basically, what everyone thinks, as opposed to what one individual thinks. It seemed to me that ANL’s dualism rests on his experience in a society in which there was only one valid point of view, and any divergence from that one view was taken simply as an individual idiosyncrasy, not a view having *some social basis*.

In human society, activities are also generated by the needs for inputs to other activities. So if the object is automobiles, there will also be a host of subordinate objects, such as steel, carburettors, tyres, etc. There are consequently, a host of distinct activities such as 'making steel' or 'assembling carburettors', etc. Thus, each activity is defined, or characterised by its object. So this is a conception of human life driven by *needs*. Activity is driven by human needs and the demands generated by those needs. It is needs which generate and motivate the activities, and human consciousness is formed by these activities and the human needs they are providing for.

Leontyev puts it this way:

In reality, however, we have to deal with *concrete, specific activities*, each of which satisfies a definite need of the subject, is oriented towards the object of this need, disappears as a result of its satisfaction and is reproduced perhaps in different conditions and in relation to a changed object.

1978, p. 5

Here, Leontyev recognises the fact that one and the same activity reproduces itself despite changes in its object. However, because Leontyev has blurred the distinction between an activity and a type of activity, the significance of this important nuance is lost, I believe. Likewise, any distinction between the *needs* of the acting subject and the object of the activity are elided. Every individual is taken to be an integral part of a homogeneous, self-reproducing unit with no divergence in interest.

The distinction between the motivations behind an activity and an action is illustrated by a well-known scenario involving a primeval group of hunters:

When a member of a group performs his labour activity he also does it to satisfy one of his needs. A beater, for example, taking part in a primeval collective hunt, was stimulated by a need for food or, perhaps, a need for clothing, which the skin of the dead animal would meet for him. At what, however, was his activity directly aimed? It may have been directed, for example, at frightening a herd of animals and sending them toward other hunters, hiding in ambush. That, properly speaking, is what should be the result of the activity of this man. And the activity of this individual member of the hunt ends with that. The rest is completed by the other members. This result, i.e. the frightening of game, etc., understandably does not in itself, and may not, lead to satisfaction of the beater's need for food, or the skin of the animal. What the processes of his activity were directed to did not, consequently, coincide with what stimulated them, i.e., did not coincide with the motive of his activity; the two were divided from one another in this instance. Processes, the object and motive of which do not coincide with one another, we shall call 'actions'. We can say, for example, that the beater's activity is the hunt, and the frightening of game his action.

1981, p. 187

In a modern economy, however, a person's needs are always met by a highly mediated process of distribution and exchange, so this may turn out to be more complex than it appears at first sight – it cannot be taken for granted that a person knows what tribe they belong to, so to speak, nor that they will in fact receive a fair share of the object. Nor is it guaranteed that the subject has any need at all for what is produced, even indirectly.

Personal sense

For Leontyev, 'meaning' is something objective for the individual:

Meaning is the generalisation of reality that is crystallised and fixed in its sensuous vehicle, i.e. normally in a word or a word combination. ... Meaning thus belongs primarily to the world of objective, historical phenomena.

1978, p. 202

He derived this concept of 'meaning' using his historical-genetic method. In the first stage of development of human society, the use of tools and language – each a material objectification of human modes of action – facilitate a division of labour, but there are not yet class divisions or differences in social position. Consequently, he says, the psyche develops through two sources – the immediacy of an individual's own sense-interactions with the world and their interactions with the system of signs used in communication. By means of sense-images constructed through participation in social practices people get to know about their own world, and by means of the meanings carried by language (and other cultural artefacts) they get to know about the world beyond their immediate horizons. Neither the 'image' (in Soviet writing, the word 'image' does not imply a visual image like it does in English) of the world presented to the individual by the senses nor the 'image' of the world presented by signs are psychological; that is, they do not form parts of the individual's psyche. Both, however, figure together in the *formative processes* of an individual's consciousness. In this way the abstract meanings contained in words, for example, are filled with sensual content by means of their association with the individual's concrete experiences, and socially developed modes of action are introduced into the individual's interactions with nature. The constellation of meanings encoded in words Leontyev calls 'social consciousness', and these meanings he characterised as '*objective*'. Social consciousness is a social and *not* a psychological category, and alongside the practical activity of individuals is one of the formative components of their psyche.

This analytical conjuncture can be expressed by saying there is *not yet* an *opposition* between the objective meanings of things and their personal sense. Personal sense and therefore consciousness differs from one person to another simply because of incidental differences from one individual to another. With the introduction of *class divisions*, people's experiences are conditioned by their social position so personal senses express social positions. Social consciousness enters into the formation of the consciousness of every individual, but systematic differences in consciousness arise because of the divergence in people's class position. With the growth of inequality and in particular the emergence of wage labour and capital, alienation arises and personal sense may find itself not merely divergent from but in *opposition* to social consciousness.

For example, the worker knows intimately how a commodity is made, but relates to it only as work. On the other hand, the capitalist owner knows nothing of the production process, but sees in the product a thing which can be sold for a profit. As Leontyev saw it, at both ends of this scale the personal sense of the activity is divorced from its objective meaning, that is, from the social process in its entirety. This rupture is manifested as *alienation*. The social formation has to reproduce itself, and consequently, arrangements are formed which motivate capitalists to hire workers to produce what is needed for the social formation to reproduce itself. These arrangements include the profit motive and wages. The functionalist fallacy (see my review of Anthony Giddens) must be noted here: one can deduce from the fact of the continued reproduction of the social formation, that there must be some reason for these various institutions, but this does not in itself constitute an *explanation* for how this comes into being and sustains itself, unless one postulates the entire social formation as a self-conscious agent.

People cannot resolve the problem of this alienation by producing a 'personal language' of their own, having access only to the ready-made 'objective meanings' encoded in social consciousness. If

social consciousness is unable to express personal senses a fundamental contradiction is created in the person's consciousness.

Ideology

Leontyev says that people acquire words and concepts via interaction with their circle of associates, and these may include 'ideological' notions which are at odds with social consciousness and enter into the conflict between personal senses and social consciousness. He talks of the ideological struggle in society in which people strive to acquire concepts and words to interpret and express their personal senses.

Leontyev formulates this problem as follows: on the one hand, personal senses arising from a person's unique experiences in their world, which are concrete, personal and *subjective*, and on the other hand, *objective* abstract meanings, encoded in words, but which, as we have seen, can be *more or less adequate* to a person's life experiences. As opposed to differences in consciousness arising from incidental differences in experience or personal development, differences in meaning borne by ideology express systematic differences in social position. In seeking to resolve conflicts in their comprehension of the world, people effectively choose not between meanings, but between social positions, expressed and comprehended through concepts and the associated meanings. Leontyev said that ideologies obey socio-historical laws and at the same time obey the inner logic of their own development. He says that all the meanings expressed by ideologies are *objective*, but are *more or less adequate* to the lives of individuals.

This approach to handling the problem of the objectivity of systems of concepts or ideologies has some virtues. It is never useful to claim that such-and-such a theory is objectively simply true or false. It is always a question of *how adequate* a theory is for someone faced with certain tasks and problems, or to put it somewhat differently, *how much of a basis* does the theory have in the reality of a particular life: a substantial basis or a very slight one?

So although some meanings are more adequate than others, whether those of 'social consciousness' or those of 'ideologies', all meanings are *objective*, he says. They have *some* social basis. Objective meanings interact with personal senses (tied up with a person's individual life experiences) in the formation of a person's consciousness, which is *psychological*, subjective and personal. Perception is *both* immediate and mediated.

The relation between the individual and the universal is thus rendered by Leontyev on to the axis of the subjective and the objective, and in the deployment of Leontyev's theory in psychology, the idea of an objective meaning being *more or less adequate* is rarely utilised. Invariably, writers in this tradition, pose problems of learning and behaviour in terms of personal, subjective meaning versus objective, 'societally agreed' meaning. Even in the capitalist West, the difference in power between, for example, teacher and pupil, easily leads to meanings being cast as simply objective or subjective.

Consider the following illustration offered by Leontyev himself:

For example, all older schoolchildren know the meaning of an examination mark and the consequences it will have. Nonetheless, a mark may appear in the consciousness of each individual pupil in essentially different ways; it may, for example, appear as a step forward (or obstacle) on the path to his chosen profession, or as a means of asserting himself in the eyes of the people around him, or perhaps in some other way. This is what compels psychology to distinguish between the conscious objective meaning and its meaning *for the subject*, or what I prefer to call the 'personal sense'. In other words, an examination mark may acquire different personal senses in the consciousness of different pupils.

1977, p. 19

It corresponds to the consciousness of some teachers and psychologists to neglect the fact that what Leontyev calls 'objective meaning' is also determined by ideologies corresponding to social positions and may be *more or less* adequate to the needs of someone according to their social position. Differences in 'personal sense' are taken to be just that: personal. Conflicts between the individual and the universal are rendered along the axis of subjective-objective, and the teacher or psychologist takes themselves to be guardians of the objective.

This is a false dichotomy, and in fact throughout Leontyev's theory, we find many distinctions wrongly rendered into dichotomies rather than relations of mediation, and this is the case here. Rather than introducing 'degrees of adequacy' to the concept of objectivity, the relation between the *individual* and the *universal* must be seen as mediated by the *particular* and not confused with the subjective/objective relation. We could think of this as a scale: on the one end is the universal – what is true for everyone; in the middle is the particular – what is true for this or that social group or class only; and on the other end, the individual – what is true for this person alone. The relation of individual, particular and universal is both simpler and more rational than subjective and more-or-less objective. What is more, it is activity theory which is best placed of all to represent this mediated relationship.

Leontyev's conception of a homogeneous subject-object belongs to another world, a world in which there were apparently no class or ethnic differences, but certainly not the world we live in today.

Particularity

As Leontyev has already outlined, concepts (I prefer to speak of concepts rather than meanings) do not exist in isolation but rather belong to what Leontyev calls 'ideologies' (systems of concepts) which in turn express the needs of certain social positions. But this is just as true of concepts which claim the mantle of 'social consciousness' except that by 'social consciousness' Leontyev meant the concepts of the hegemonic ideology. A better word for this hegemonic subject position is 'universal'. 'Universal' does not mean 'general' – what every single one of us believes, and nor does it mean the standpoint of the boss or the Prime Minister, but rather that of the community *as a whole*. The universal is represented in law and institutionalised knowledge shared by the entire community, rather than any sectional interest, including the dominant one. The universal is akin to the concept of 'public reason' or the terms of a peace treaty, conventional knowledge, even if doesn't always stand up well under critique. The difference between the universal and the particular is relative as is the difference between the individual and the particular. In our times, in many parts of the school curriculum, it must be difficult for teacher to know what to teach without attracting accusations of partisanship – nothing is proof from critique.

Leontyev has explained that 'ideologies' express different social positions, but everyone in a social formation occupies *some* social position and what is more, shares to one degree or another in the viewpoint of *numerous* social positions. It is inescapable that the various groupings of concepts found in social life express one or another social position. But looking at it more closely, and in the spirit of Leontyev's own approach, we can be more specific. Each ideology found in a community represents the system of concepts associated with a specific *activity* directed at resolving some social problem or task generally characteristic of some social position. A scientific concept flows from the pursuit of science, a religious concept flows from the pursuit of religious observance, the concepts of the wage worker flow from struggling to improve wages and working conditions, and so on. Although there are also developmental differences and contingent, individual differences, systematic differences in meaning are associated with *particular* interests and particular activities.

Individual ideas reflect contingent individual differences *as well as* particular differences and what is universal in the culture. What is distinctive in an individual's consciousness arises from

individual experiences, but contingencies aside, these experiences reflect in large measure the particular activities in which an individual participates as well as their relation to other social positions and their exposure to ideologies. In short, the particular (i.e., various activities) mediate between the individual and the universal. The universal exists only thanks to those activities in which all individuals participate in *some way*.

This means that in dealing with a child's learning, it is not just the child's personal interests and proclivities on one side and objective truth on the other. Rather, the child comes to the universal and the dominant culture as a participant in a certain cultural and social position, in addition to the various developmental and incidental issues they face. For example, teachers may become frustrated that students find classical literature uninteresting and impenetrable. Teachers overcome this by finding some need, some interest that the child has which provides a motive for struggling with a text which can lead them to an appreciation of literature which is otherwise foreign to them. The key to finding that bridge is sometimes, but usually not, the personal attributes of the child, but the child's *cultural and social position*. Unless we understand this, activity theory occupies a position of dogmatism: "your opinion is subjective but my opinion is objective."

The universal is something objective in the sense that every individual has to deal with it, like it or not, but in its content the universal is far from objective, and may express the point of view of one (dominant) class and not another. The difference between the subjective and the objective is relative, and with the development of social practice, the limits of human knowledge are continuously changing: what was objective may turn out to be a mere appearance or partisan.

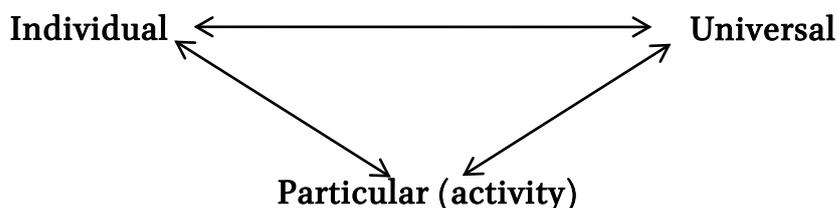
In relation to the example of the examination mark, the mark itself is something objective, but it would be wrong to insist that the marking of the student's exam paper was objective (disinterested) or that its significance for the student was objective (invariant), even though, being the results of institutionalised practices, both have universal implications. It may be the case that within the student's cultural community the topic under examination was viewed differently, and its teaching held in such contempt that a poor mark would have been worn as a badge of honour, or, the examination result may have been meaningless for progress in the student's chosen trade. These are not *individual* factors, but *social* factors, representing *particular* social activities, which rank on the same level as the factors which motivate particular other students to strive for a good examination result. Leontyev was right (despite falsely equating 'ideal' and 'mental') when he said:

Being, the life of each individual is made up of the sum-total or, to be more exact, a system, a hierarchy of successive activities. It is in activity that the transition or 'translation' of the reflected object into the subjective image, into the ideal, takes place; at the same time it is also in activity that the transition is achieved from the ideal into activity's objective results, its products, into the material.

1977, p. 396

My point may be summed up by saying that Leontyev did not fully work out these relations in terms of an *activity theory*. His treatment of ideology in terms of objective meanings which are more or less adequate, that is to say, particular rather than general, suggests that the relation between the individual and the universal is mediated by activity, in logical terms:

There is in fact a pervasive dualism in Leontyev's writing. The rendering of the relation of the individual to the universal as subjective vs. objective is the most serious but there are others.



For example:

Moreover, the object of activity appears in two forms: first, in its independent existence, commanding the activity of the subject, and second, as the mental image of the object, as the product of the subject's 'detection' of its properties, which is effected by the activity of the subject and cannot be effected otherwise

1977, p. 397

What Leontyev means by the object "commanding the activity of the subject" is the 'hard necessity' of life, that one must work to live, and that collectively a community must produce a certain range of goods, and by one or another social arrangement individuals find themselves obliged to participate in activities which regularly produce the given object. The 'mental image' refers to the socially constructed consciousness a person has of their participation in the activity. But it is not as clear cut as that for there may be (more or less organised) *social differences* of motivation and interpretation of the object in play, and it is the sum total of these particular social relations which determines both the 'independent' existence of the object and the subject's 'image' of it.

For example, quite aside from the remuneration a worker gets from employment at the Post Office, or the service a resident gets from the deliveries, some postal workers see the Post Office as a public service and some residents see the Post Office as a profit-making enterprise of which they are customers, while private courier companies see the Post Office as either a competitor or a collaborator. Employees of a capitalist firm might see the firm solely as a means of earning a wage, but others will not 'merely understand' the role of the company but have a genuine commitment to it, the more so given that most public services are delivered by for-profit private companies these days. And these are *social, not personal, differences, differences mediated by participation in activities* and constituting an individual's social position. So between individuals' actions and the outcome of the activity there are a number of particular, socially constructed concepts of what it is all for, not just one.

Consider this dichotomy:

... mental reflection occurs owing to the bifurcation of the subject's vital processes into the processes that realise his direct biotic relations, and the 'signal' processes that mediate them.

1977, p. 410

I would say that mental reflection is not just 'caused' by the introduction of sign use in the self-regulation of the organism. Rather, as Vygotsky said: mental reflection facilitates self-regulation by *mediating between* the physiology of the organism and its behaviour.

Later, he refers to:

This is the problem of the specific nature of the functioning of knowledge, concepts, conceptual models, etc., in the system of social relations, in the social consciousness, on the one hand, and, on the other, in the individual's activity that realises his social relations, in the individual consciousness.

1977, p. 410

Here Leontyev mystifies this relation, reducing it to a dichotomy of the individual versus 'society', neglecting an important distinction in the constitution of social consciousness, i.e., on one hand the *material conditions* including the technical means of production, land, built environment and the literature, language and human material, and on the other the *activities* by means of which

these material conditions (artefacts) are put into motion and penetrate individual consciousness. In other words this is actually a *three*-sided relation: material conditions, activities and actions.

And this is an important observation. Leontyev takes 'social consciousness' to be an objective, material category, and in doing so he is consistent with orthodox Marxist approaches. On the other hand, individual consciousness is a subjective, psychological category. The process which 'bridges' or mediates between these two is activity, and activity is both material and psychological. This observation is important for social theory because if activities are to be units for social theory there must be no ambiguity as to whether activities are psychological or material entities. They are *both*, and this is given concrete content by the fact that activities mediate between the material conditions, including the ideal (i.e., social) properties of artefacts, and human consciousness, just as consciousness mediates between material conditions and human activity and material conditions mediate between consciousness and activity.

As a result of Leontyev's failure to grasp these mediated relationships and his persistent rendering these dialectical relations as dichotomies, a number of weaknesses have developed in his theory.

(a) Dogmatism

It is generally recognised that there may be a number of legitimate opinions on any given question arising in social life and if our interlocutor has a different opinion, we do not normally recommend they visit a psychologist or go back to school. We understand that one's life experience, social position, commitments and the activities in which one is engaged will give a person a different angle on things and sometimes it is quite impossible to find an answer to some question which is genuinely satisfactory to everyone regardless of their social position. To deny this, and on the contrary suggest that there is only one 'objective' meaning to something and cast other views as biased and partial, as Leontyev does, is dogmatism. Science always seeks after objective truth, but this is never final.

Within the context of a specific activity or institution, such as a certain branch of science, such an insistence may be justified to an extent, and with qualifications, in the context of education and child development. Nevertheless, to equate the universal and the objective is a category mistake.

Further, an activity may be oriented to a certain object at one moment, but contradictions and problems will emerge, and the concept of the object will change. The concept which participants have of the object of an activity (which will differ from person to person) develops over time. Activities are learning processes. To insist at the outset on a certain definition of the object, which is continuously consumed and produced, would be misplaced dogmatism.

(b) Functionalism

The social theory which flows from Leontyev's theory is a variety of functionalism. Functionalism is a trend of social theory associated with the name of the American sociologist, Talcott Parsons, which was ascendant in the period after World War Two. Functionalism sees the society as an *organism* in which all the constituent parts have 'functions', i.e., answer to the question "What is this *for*? What is its *role*?" and like biological organisms, social organisms have an inherent tendency towards stability; disturbances to its functioning stimulate new processes which restore the status quo. It is descriptive to an extent but it is not explanatory. Anthony Giddens' (1984) critique of Functionalism is decisive.

Leontyev sees social activity in terms of various objects each of which answer to a certain social need and every social formation has evolved social arrangements such that these objects "command the activity of the subject," and determine the actions of everyone in the community.

But who determines the *needs* of society? And is 'the needs of society' even a coherent notion? One gets the impression that in Leontyev's world, which had supposedly surpassed the class differences, 'anarchy of production' and alienation of capitalism, it was the Politburo which

determined all the needs of the society and set goals and objects for the various industries in Five Year Plans. But it is widely accepted now that such a view was a fantasy. The real object, though rarely realised, was always whatever a stratum of administrators determined.

In the case of a liberal capitalist society, the situation is even worse: rarely does the government or anyone else give consideration to the needs of the whole community. Anarchy of production reigns.

Since every existing activity is by Leontyev's *definition* directed at a social need, we evidently have among those needs: war, drug smuggling, advertising, cigarettes and obesity-producing foods. The theory simply fails as an explanatory tool. The market is not a process for determining and balancing the needs of the community, any more than nature is 'for' human enjoyment. Certainly, *demand* regulates the economy, but 'demand' is conceptually quite distant from 'need'. Need places limits on human behaviour, but these are very elastic limits. Further, the object of every capitalist firm is accumulation of capital. Any collateral social benefit is purely accidental.

(c) 'Productivism'

In common with all social theory in the Soviet era, human 'activity' is rendered as 'labour' with the strong implication that a certain kind of labour, industrial labour, is the archetype and has a determining function. The genetic derivation of the theory, beginning from micro-organisms and working its way up through early humans to class society, justifies a productivist explanation. As useful as this Marxist approach might be for historical analysis this by no means justifies its place in psychology. Language co-evolved with the production of tools so there is no reason to privilege labour over communication in the foundations of psychology. Developing a foundation for social theory from a psychology which has surreptitiously introduced a productivist theory of history into its foundations risks misleading social theory as well as psychology.

Further, although signs do figure throughout as mediating communication, and artefacts in general remain the mediators of all actions, Leontyev seems to have put a distance between himself and Vygotsky by emphasising labour, i.e., *tool*-mediated activity, rather than *sign*-mediation. Leontyev's productivism is an upshot of this marginalisation of sign mediation. In today's world it is difficult to draw a line between communication and production, especially in the most dominant economies. This problem can be corrected by removing the bias inherent in the word 'labour' and sticking with 'activity'. The more so as Leontyev never had anything to say about the *actual* labour process in the USSR where he lived.

Part 2. Leontyev's theory of the personality

'Personality' (личность) is a complex and chameleon concept: which attributes of an individual are to be counted under the heading of 'personality' and which not? Leontyev relegates to the category of 'substructures' of the personality "such various traits as, for example, moral qualities, knowledge, habits and customs, forms of psychological reflection, and temperament" (1978, p. 154). What he sees as composing the structure of a personality are units that I will call 'motives' for the moment, and it is these motives which both express and give meaning to a person's life, or more generally form the *structure of meaning* for the person. What is more usually understood as 'personality' nowadays more closely approximates what Leontyev calls 'forms of psychological reflection', but as I hope to show it is precisely the structure of meaning as understood by Leontyev which is of importance in connection with framing a social theory, even if it is only partially explanatory in the domain of psychology.

During the first phase of development of a personality, the child or youth is just an expression of the class fraction and cultural group in which they have been raised.

The subject's belonging to a class conditions even at the outset the development of his connections with the surrounding world, a greater or smaller segment of his practical activity, his contacts, his knowledge, and his acquiring norms of behaviour. All of these are acquisitions from which personality is made up at the stage of its initial formation.

1978, pp. 178-9

Leontyev says that at this stage it cannot properly be said that there is a personality because the person is merely an instance of their social group:

later this situation is turned around, and they become a *subject* of their social group, unconsciously and then consciously, ... decisive or vacillating ... at every turn of his life's way he must free himself of something, confirm something in himself, and he must do all this and not simply 'submit to the effect of the environment'.

1978, p. 179

What were formerly the traits of a person of their kind become later merely the *conditions* for the formation of a personality properly so called. The subject gradually frees themselves from their biography, discarding some aspects of their 'parochial' personality while consciously developing others.

Personality thus no longer seems to be the result of a direct layering of external influences; it appears as something that man makes of himself, confirming his human life. He confirms it in everyday affairs and contacts, as well as in people to whom he gives some part of himself on the barricades of class struggles, as well as on the fields of battle for his country, and at times he consciously confirms it even at the price of his physical life.

1978, p. 185

A person's motivation is represented to the person in the shape of the activities to which they are committed, so to the extent that the subject actively commits themselves to an activity, acquiring in the meantime the knowledge and skills, the norms and all the attributes associated with the activity, these motives, represented by the object of the activity, become a stable part of the person's personality. The activities themselves wax and wane, prove successful or fail – their fate depending on factors in the wider social world. The personality however constitutes a relatively stable base in the inner world of the subject. Development of the personality is tied up with the development of the subject's will and the subject's emotional life is linked to the fate of these activities, but the personality remains a relatively stable psychic formation.

In the next phase of development, the subject arranges the units of their personality into a *structure*. The units of this structure are the 'motives', so this lifeworld could also be called a 'motivational structure'. Some motives make their way to the top of a hierarchy, dominating and leading others which become conditional upon it. Sometimes, the personality becomes split with some motivations dominant in some situations while others predominate in other situations. There will also be conflict between motives, and development of the personality entailing resolution of these internal conflicts, either subsuming a motivational conflict into more profound motives which transcend the conflict, or by relegating or discarding one motivation.

The final phase of the development of a personality is entailed in the raising of motivations above the material needs tied up in maintaining their life in their social group up to more abstract motivations. Ultimately, following Aristotle, "the good life for humanity" becomes the leading motive, conditioning and leading other motivations in the subject's life and personality.

In the earliest stages of personality development, development is driven by *need*. Needs develop of course and never remain at the animal level, but in conditions where motivations are driven by needs the person is simply a product of their environment. “Personality cannot develop within the framework of need; its development necessarily presupposes a displacement of needs by creation, which alone does not know limits” (1978, p. 186). Once the subject begins to free themselves from subordination to the needs and norms of their social group, and their personality composes itself of ideal social motives, Leontyev now increasingly refers to the motives as *otnosheniya* (отношение, *pl.* отношения) rather than motives (мотивов). ‘отношения’ is usually translated as ‘relations’, but it is also used to mean ‘priorities’ or ‘attitudes’ or ‘orientations’. (On *Otnosheniya*, see my review of Fedor Vasilyuk).

... the personality of man also ‘is produced’ – it is created by the *otnosheniya*, into which the individual enters in his activity.

1978, p. 152

These priorities or relations are the *commitments* the person makes to activities, and which take up more or less leading positions in the structure of their motives. What is indicated is an ideal motive, which I would prefer to call a ‘life-project’ inasmuch as in the fully developed personality it does not represent a ‘need’ so much as a commitment to an ideal of some kind.

Leontyev notes a pathology of the personality found in “superprosperous consumer society” when the intrinsic value of objects as means of satisfaction of needs has been lost and commodities perform only the function of confirming a person’s prestige. In such a situation the personality may take on a “configuration of flatness devoid of real summits when what is small in life man takes for something large, and the large things he does not see at all” (1978, p. 183).

Although Leontyev correctly emphasises the subjective side in the formation of personality, his theory lacks a satisfactory explanation of how the subject adopts some motives and discards others in the early formation of the personality or how and why a person might change their life-world. It seems to me that the concept used by Vygotsky and later by Fedor Vasilyuk, *perezhivaniya* (переживания) – deeply-felt or life-changing events in a person’s life and the person’s response to them – has more explanatory power.

Leontyev’s activity theory remains a powerful and complex approach to psychology, especially if it is used in conjunction with Vygotsky’s Cultural Psychology. It has been subject to at least two generations of development since Leontyev’s day, and most of its shortcomings may be overcome.

Finally, I am going to review an alternative conception of an activity which I believe could render Leontyev’s activity theory suitable to be part of a foundation for social theory.

Part 3. A ‘project’ as an activity

A project is an activity, that is, a unit of activity characterised by a shared object-concept, but whereas Leontyev saw activities as aimed at reproducing ongoing objects, I take it that the object, archetypically, is an ideal form of the object acted upon, generally a *change* in reality. But projects are unambiguously *discrete* entities, and I shall call the unit of activity a ‘project’ both because the word has connotations which are helpful in clarifying the concept of a unit of activity, and so that I can outline a version of activity theory without conveying the impression that I have merely misunderstood Leontyev. At the same time, I do not monotonously refer to every institution, movement, life-commitment, social practice or whatever as a ‘project’. But whatever word is used, it is as a *project* that I conceive them.

'Project' denotes a future-oriented, collaborative endeavour in which people work together towards some goal, despite the fact that not every participant holds exactly the same notion of what the project is about. In addition, the object keeps changing as the project unfolds, like a design project. ('Design' and 'project' are the same word in Russian). Projects often end up producing something which is quite unexpected for *all* of the participants.

That is, rather than *first* defining an object or motive and *then* defining the project as that aggregate of actions directed towards that object, I say that projects exist, and they are constituted by *collaboration* towards a shared object, but what this object is has to be determined by analysis of the project; it might be an utter fiction. Equally, it is quite feasible that more than one distinct project could be working on one and the same object with differing goals, just as many different motives could coexist within the same project. The *relations of collaboration* between the actions mark out the extent of a project.

A project is launched to solve some social problem, a problem that has arisen for some category of individuals. Some members of this group form a concept of what has to be done and begin to act together to realise that concept. Usually, this is past history. Once the project is launched it takes on an identity and a life of its own, so to speak. The project becomes a kind of social movement (in the broadest sense); it adopts an identity representing the concept it aims to realise, but this object-concept is subject to ongoing revision, according to both its inner logic and the events engendered by the project activity. Individuals can participate in the project, but the terms on which they participate are quite diverse, taking into account their other commitments. To the extent that the project makes headway in realising its object, it eventually becomes institutionalised and progresses from an institution in which people work on a more or less instrumental basis to become an indistinguishable component of everyone's daily life. So the concepts people use to orient their individual actions, all are the products of projects, which begin life as contradictions within the existing social formation.

A project progresses through a number of distinctly different phases, a *lifecycle*, and people's relation to participation in the project is diverse. Through all the changes in the forms of activity and object-concepts, we can distinguish between phases of one and the same project and what are distinct projects. The inner logic of the object-concept is what is decisive, but the collaborative coherence and continuity of the component actions and overlapping continuity of the participants help us trace the logic of that development.

Everything that Leontyev says about the role of activities in the shaping of consciousness remains true for projects, with the qualifications which have already been outlined. Our conception of activities as projects has to give a higher profile to social critique, rather than accepting the dominant social consciousness as 'objective' and only mentioning other ideologies as alternatives to the dominant social consciousness or an afterthought. The formation of a project is not a passive response to need, but a creative process of problem solving which also involves the construction of identities and meaning in life and testifies not to the subordination of human being to need, but rather to human freedom and the capacity of human beings to change the world they live in. More than one project can arise in response to one and the same problem, and distinct projects may cooperate or conflict with one another.

I believe that Leontyev's theory of personality as a structure of meanings each related to a collaborative project captures how projects enter into the formation of the personality. However, an investigation of *perezhivanie* is needed to clarify how people come to be committed to projects.

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