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Part III. The Psychology of the Will

## 2. The development of the Will through childhood

### Introduction

I have already outlined how the Will is constituted within the psychology of an individual person, but I have yet to explain *how* a newborn, barely manifesting even a coherent natural will, becomes an adult citizen who can raise a family, earn a living, vote, etc. This chapter remains within the *psychology* of the Will, outlining *how* the Will becomes as free as it can be within the domain of psychology. It will become clear how Vygotsky's psychology is inherently interdisciplinary and will set us up to approach the problem of the collective Will on solid, scientific ground in the next section.

The development of the Will in ontogeny has to be understood across two different domains: childhood and adulthood. The development of the Will in adulthood follows different principles, which will be taken up in the next chapter.

Throughout childhood, the Will passes through a series of six crises demarcating six different age periods, and only at the end of this passage do we find an adult whose personality is fully formed such that they can enjoy all the rights and opportunities of citizenship. The accomplishment of the phase of development preceding each crisis is distinctive and sets the scene for the critical phase which brings it to an end with the passage to a new period of development. Each of these phases of crisis is characterised as a *qualitative leap forward in the development of the Will*. Consequently, I will focus this narrative on the phases of crisis, and leave more detailed consideration of the phases of gradual adaptation between crises for another day. My business here is just the Will.

One of the benefits of examining each successive phase of development of the Will is that the narrative form provides an *analysis* of the Will into its essential components, as its components are built one element at a time. None of the accomplishments of childhood are absolutely irreversible, and the fate of the Will in adulthood will manifest the nature of the successive crises of childhood.

Vygotsky notes the following qualification in relation to one of the critical phases, but the same caution applies *mutatis mutandis* to all the crises:

The facts show that in other conditions of enculturation the crisis unfolds otherwise. In children moving from a nursery to kindergarten, the crisis flows differently than in children entering kindergarten directly from families. However, the crisis always takes place in the normal course of child development.

Vygotsky, 2021a

### The six crises of child development

The crises dealt with below are named according to the age Vygotsky assigned to each crisis on the basis of his experience in the young Soviet Republic. There is

no suggestion that the crises necessarily happen to all children or in all cultures at the same age. As cited above, however, all these crises must be experienced by children who successfully make it to adulthood and the freedoms that come with that. But they will happen differently, and the different ways the crises are experienced will mark the personality of the adult. I will not touch on issues specific to neurodiversity or people with disabilities as this would complicate the already difficult task in hand.

One of the ways in which an age period is identified is that the general population has a word indicating a child currently in that particular period of development. This not only verifies that the period is *real* and not a figment of the researcher's imagination, but it also fixes the expectations on a child of this age and directs adults as to what to expect and how to respond to the child.

Further, every culture has fixed ages for admission to the various institutions for the care and education of children, such as nursery, kindergarten, primary school, secondary school and university. These more or less fixed ages both indicate the stage of development expected of a child of the given age in a given nation and function as a factor determining the pace of psychological development.

Each stage of child development is marked by a particular mode of freedom or independence of the Will from the parent.

### Social Situation of Development

The key concept in the dynamics of each period in a child's life is the unique "social situation of development" which drives development in that period. In Vygotsky's words:

... at the beginning of each given age period there exists a completely original, exclusive, unique and unrepeatable relationship between the child and the environment specific to that age alone, which we will call the *social situation of development* of a given age. The social situation of development of a given age is the starting point for all of the dynamic changes occurring in development during a given period. It determines wholly and entirely the forms and the path by following which the child acquires newer and newer properties of his personality, drawing them from the environment as the main source of his own development, the path by which the social becomes the individual.  
op. cit.

Vygotsky conceives of the social environment in which the child finds itself and the relationship of the child to other people, not just as a collection of factors, but concretely as a *predicament*. This is the meaning of the word "situation."

In each age-period, the child's needs are met through a specific social arrangement. As development proceeds, this arrangement becomes restrictive, and the child experiences it as a constraint that must be overcome. The child *must* develop in order to emancipate itself from the trap. In a *stable* phase of development, this striving brings specific psychological functions to maturity, bringing into being a new predicament. In *critical* phases, the child breaks from this situation and establishes a new mode of behaviour and interaction.

The situation is shaped by the expectations of adults and institutions, which both respond to and constrain the child's development. As the child develops, these expectations become out of step with the child's emerging capacities.

At first, these relations are experienced as support and security, but later as limitation. The child comes to experience the situation as restrictive and strives to overcome it. With their Will blocked or disabled the child will begin to display 'difficulty' or awkwardness.

Each period is characterised by the emergence of a *central* neoformation that organises development of the whole.

In the case of gradual phases of development, having reached a certain level of maturity, the central neoformation continues to develop throughout life, but is no longer leading the process of development. Rather, its development becomes a subordinate factor in the development of the whole child driven by the neoformation of the given age. There are generally two stages in a stable phase of development. In the critical phases of development, the central neoformation created by the crisis fades away as the changes in the child's relationship to its environment are stabilised.

As the child develops, new needs emerge that cannot be satisfied within the existing situation. These needs require a new role and a new form of interaction. The child must therefore disrupt the existing situation in order to develop. An infant may be quite happy having its mouth stuffed with food ... up to a point, but it soon feels the need to have a say over what is put in their mouth. That is to say, their Will has developed to a point such that it is being frustrated through lack of recognition.

### The structure of the crisis of the Will

The child becomes aware of new needs but is unable to satisfy them, both because of their own limitations and because adults continue to treat the child according to their earlier capacities. The situation is therefore experienced as a restriction. For example, a child might be angry and wants to defy their mother, but because they are emotionally attached to their mother and simply can't overcome their own inclination, their mother finds it easy to manipulate them. In this circumstance the child may eventually become defiant and refuse to do *anything* they are told.

Development is actualised through the child's striving to transform this situation. During a phase of gradual development, the requirements of *one part*, the neoformation, determine the character of the whole psychology of the child. But in the critical phase, the *whole* – the crisis – determines the fate and role of every part of the child's psychology.

Development in the crisis phase depends on adults recognising the child's emerging needs and responding to them. If this does not occur, development is i. If the child does not strive to overcome these constraints and emancipate itself, then the child will not develop. For example, a young teenager who never feels any need to criticise the views and ways of their own family may never fully develop as an adult citizen and take their own position in society. Thus the child must become aware, at their level, of the limitations of their current position and of the possibility of a new role.

Once the parents have given way to the child's Will and taken away the play pen, the parents' fears are immediately confirmed – the child has forcefully been demanding the right to walk around the room like everyone else, but has never had the opportunity to walk more than a metre without adult support. Now the child stumbles and falls, repeatedly. This is the second phase of the crisis period; the child has won the argument but they are not yet competent. They have a terrible time in the school playground, crash the family car or get mixed up with the wrong people, or whatever. They get through this period, but most likely not without pain.

Vygotsky characterised each crisis phase by the particular development of the Will which is accomplished in the given crisis. Very often, the nature of the crisis is well-known among parents because the crisis phases are almost always marked by *difficulty*.

The critical phases of development are *transitional*; the difficult behaviour fades once the new formation of the Will is established.

This contrasts with the accomplishments of the phases of stable development each of which creates a stable base for the next period of development. The neoformation which characterised it, however, far from fading away continues to develop although now in a subordinate position.

### The definition of the periods

A culture offers a finite number of roles corresponding to stages of life—'toddler', 'school child', 'teenager', and so on. These roles define specific, normative relations between the individual and those around them. These culturally defined stages are what is significant. The numerical ages attached to them are approximate and vary historically and culturally.

The driving force of development is the contradiction between the child's emerging needs and the existing social means of satisfying them. This contradiction is universal, but its concrete form varies with cultural conditions and the expectations of adults. If these expectations fail to respond to the child's emerging needs, development may be distorted. For example, the infant may grasp for its mother's breast, but the mother may or may not respond; the child's predicament is the same, but the outcome is different.

Actualisation of the social situation of development is different at every social, cultural and historical juncture, and over and above individual differences, the normal course of development is different in each case. In that sense, development is culturally determined.

### 'Gradual' development

This work focuses on phases of crisis, since my claim is that it is in these that the Will develops. Each crisis, however, opens into a phase of stable or 'gradual' development.

These phases are not strictly gradual; development continues through smaller crises, but development in stable phases takes the form of *adaptation*. Having assumed a new role, the child develops the psychological functions required for that role, building on earlier achievements and preparing for the next stage.

This gradually transforms the child's relation to their social environment. For example, the toddler's walking becomes steady and speech becomes coherent.

This is adaptation because having assumed a new social role, the child must adjust to its demands. The ideal form of the role is present in the environment and guides development, often through trial and error. Each error may provoke a small crisis through which adjustment is refined.

Stable phases contain two stages: one consolidating the function launched by the preceding critical phase, the other maturing the central neoformation and conditions for the next crisis.

### Critical phases

During the crisis phase the child refuses to adapt, overturns their previous relation to the world, and demands a change in how they are treated.

Each critical phase has two stages: first, the breakdown of the previous relation; second, the birth of a new stable relation.

The critical phases and the phases of stable development are inextricably linked to one another and both equally necessary for successful adulthood. Child psychologists tend to focus on the various psychological functions which are mastered during the successive phases of gradual development, because the psychological formations accomplished in the period of gradual adaptation continue to develop throughout life. The difficult behaviour of the critical phases on the other hand appears as dysfunction, is transitional and fades away.

Each critical phase is characterised, however, by the establishment of a new level in the development of the Will. Specific new psychological functions will emerge which Vygotsky calls 'neoformations'. One of them has the status of a *universal*, inasmuch as it drives the development of all the neoformations of the new phase of gradual development. The central neoformation of a critical phase responds to the predicament created by the foregoing phase of gradual development.

The critical phases take on the appearance of mere rites of passage *between* age periods and their significance is easily overlooked. But the textbooks on these periods of development give the periods of gradual development their due and I will deal with them only briefly, but sufficiently to bring out the predicament resolved by the crisis phase.

The first stage of a critical phase forcefully breaks up the former relationship with its environment, the second struggles to establish a new stable relationship. One or several neoformations may be manifested in a critical phase, development being driven by the demands of the crisis.

Each critical phase has a zone of proximal development in which the new relation the child seeks can be realised with adult assistance. This creates a tension for adults, who must both restrain and support the child's emerging independence.

This work focuses on critical phases because they reveal the anatomy of the Will. Each crisis leaves a lasting residue in its development.

## Analysis by units

Vygotsky insists that analysis of child development must be based on units that include both the child and the environment. This is expressed in the concept of *perezhivanie*. All neoformations must be understood in this way, including those with only a *particular* as well as those with a *universal* role in the child's development.

The child's personality is constructed through the critical phases, each of which is a *perezhivanie*, or experience, that transforms the child's relation to their environment and gives rise to a new one. Personality is this relation, and the situation includes both child and environment.

Thus all key psychological concepts – behaviour, experience, personality, Will – must be understood not as internal functions, but as relations between the subject and its environment, above all its social environment.

## The Six Crises

I rely below on the excellent new translations of Vygotsky's pedagogical works (Vygotsky, 2021; 2021a; 2024; 2024a) where the periods of stable and critical development are explained in great detail, together with Vygotsky's hesitations and ambiguity at times, and with helpful editorial commentary.

### 1. The Crisis of Birth and the newborn

Approximately the first month after birth when the child is known as a 'newborn' constitutes a *critical phase* in the development of the child.

The psychic life of the newborn is predominantly linked to the subcortical centres of the brain and it is not retained as such in the subsequent development of the child, although it is included as a subordinate instance in psychic formations of a higher order. The cortex is quite underdeveloped but the psychic life of the newborn exists and must be described as *rudimentary*. The helplessness of the newborn human compared to the relative independence of the newborns of other species, indicates that the ancient brain mechanisms are less autonomous in their functioning thanks to their links to still immature phylogenetically newer parts of the brain. Even the natural will is disabled and the behaviour of the newborn is marked only by uncoordinated instinctive movements – grasping, snuggling, sucking.

With birth, the newborn acquires the first condition for freedom of the Will in being separated from the mother *physically*, however, not biologically. The newborn is still entirely dependent on the mother for food, warmth, protection, and even basic mobility. The life of the newborn is one of dozing, with sleeping and waking states not yet differentiated. The development of a solid substratum of the psychic life of the child which began with conception continues after birth, not particularly affected by the moment of birth.

The social situation of development, the predicament defining the newborn phase of life, is the utter dependence of the child on their social environment, with the total absence of communicative speech.

The act of birth and the first month or so of the life of the newborn is a critical phase of development distinct from the underlying gradual development of the substratum of life which began with conception. With birth, the newborn breaks

from its life in the womb and prepares for an independent life. The newborn knows only feelings and not sensations (in Hegel's sense), and consequently, no distinction between self and other, nor any distinction between human objects and inanimate objects.

There are no inborn representations, no valid apperceptions, i.e. no understanding of external objects and processes as such, nor, finally, any conscious Will or aspiration.

Vygotsky, 2021a

The newborn feels only the situation *as a whole*, threatening or welcoming, diffusely, without being able to *ascribe* the feeling to any feature of their own condition or of the objective world or even differentiate between sight and sound. The sensori-motor nervous system is undifferentiated between perception and movement.

The central neoformation established in the newborn phase of life is the capacity to distinguish between figure and background:

The law of structuring or separating out the figure and the background constitutes, apparently, the most primitive feature of psychic life, forming the starting point of the subsequent development of consciousness.

op. cit.

The end of the newborn phase of development is the appearance of a smile in reaction to the human voice. This reflex is the beginning of the child's active participation in social life, which is possible only on the basis of an individual psychic life, and the essential condition for the development of consciousness and a Will.

## 2. Infancy

Infancy, approximately the first year of life after the newborn phase, is a phase of stable development. The infant is still immobile and dependent on adults to meet their every need so their actions are directed not at objects, but at adults around them. Every action the infant takes relies on the collaboration of an adult, and yet the infant lacks communicative speech. The infant can now perceive the presence of an adult, however, and in time recognise its mother's face. This is the predicament creating the social situation of development in infancy.

At the beginning of infancy, the child's muscles and skeleton are too weak for the child to do more than lie in their cot, but during this phase the infant begins to have enough motor control, strength and energy to actively interact with others. The brain increases in weight by a factor of 2.5 with the development of myelin sheaths around the nerve fibres.

The accomplishment of the newborn phase was the ability to distinguish figure from background, and on the back of this newfound ability, the infant begins to take not just a passive, but an *active* interest in the outside world, even interrupting feeding to open its eyes, and is able to distinguish between the different sense organs and coordinate them. Its first social reaction, to smile in reaction to pleasure and surprise, is used to secure the collaboration of adults. The infant begins to have an influence over its stimuli, with a growing sensori-

motor nervous system, reaching for objects and taking visual impressions of the world. The infant's active interest in the outside world shows

the capacity to actively go beyond direct drives and instinctive tendencies. For the child it is as if the external world has been discovered. This new relationship to reality signifies the beginning of the infant period, or rather – of its first stage.

Vygotsky, op. cit.

In the second stage of infancy, the active interest in the world leads to prolonged processes of behaviour rather than distinct actions, drawing attention to objects, searching for missing toys. Imitation appears for the first time.

Whereas the newborn benefited not at all from its experiences, all their movements being determined by innate drives, the infant experiences the world through *conditioned reflexes* and thus begins the long process of adapting to the cultural world into which they have been thrust.

The infant's ability to recognise human voices and faces has still not allowed the infant to distinguish their *own* limbs from those of others. Their own limbs appear to it as alien objects. Affect is still driven by basic needs, but these basic needs can only be met in collaboration with their adult carers; they cannot yet handle material objects on their own.

The psychology of the infant Vygotsky characterises as an 'Ur-wir', that is, a primordial 'we'. The editors, Kellogg and Veresov, nicely liken this consciousness to what we all experience while singing in a chorus, marching in a protest or watching our football team. The Ur-wir is a stable formation gradually increasing the scope of the infant's activity and the central neoformation of the phase of infancy.

Lacking higher psychological functions, but with relatively well-developed motor skills and muscles, and interacting with the world around them thanks to participation in the Ur-wir, qualitatively new expressions of the child's actions become available, and this sets the scene for the crisis at one.

### 3. The crisis at one

There is no completed manuscript of Vygotsky's views on the crisis at one, and the editors of the *Pedological Works* (2021a) have used "transcriptions of the spoken lectures apparently given while he was thinking through the chapters which he intended to write." The same applies to the two chapters following.

Vygotsky says that there are three neoformations to be found in the crisis at one year: "hypobulic seizures" (i.e., sudden loss of initiative or Will), "autonomous speech" and the child's first attempts at walking. Since the child's efforts at walking continue through into infancy, and although new, they are *not transitory* formations, they are therefore not characteristic of the crisis phase. Both the 'hypobulic seizures' and the 'autonomous speech' with its associated behaviour fade away at the end of the transitional period. The question concerns the structure of the transition taking place as the infant begins to extricate itself from the Ur-wir and establish the Ich: which neoformation is leading?

Autonomous speech is composed of single-word indexical exclamations, what could be called 'verbal pointing'. The object indicated varies from one situation to the next. The meaning of the word is chain-like, one object being connected

to the next by some feature, which in turn is connected to the next by some other feature. The words do not function as any kind of generalisation and although sounds are drawn from adult speech, they are not words in the adult lexicon. They form part of a behaviour in which the toddler draws attention to some object or expresses active interest in or surprise at the object. It seems to me that this behaviour will lead to the first crack in the Ur-wir.

The 'Ur-word' of autonomous speech functions as a means of communication with adults, but the child cannot yet use adult words, even though it may understand adult words and respond to them appropriately. The Ur-word is the embryo of speech in that it is its first means of verbal communication, but the child at this age does not use adult words, and adults have great difficulty in understanding what the child means. Vygotsky believes that "all of the hypobulic displays of the child stem from the difficulties of mutual understanding." This is all the more frustrating for the child, because the child is unaware that their adult carers do not share their consciousness. Why then is my effort to gain the adults' assistance failing?

The child's Will is directed at mastering this crucial form of behaviour.

Vygotsky repeatedly points out that the child's behaviour at this age, including its autonomous speech, marks the first manifestation of the child's own Will:

What does this affective-volitional content of child words mean? It means that what the child expresses in speech corresponds not to our assertions but rather more to our exclamations, with the aid of which we make affective appraisals, affective attitudes, emotional reactions and volitional tendencies. ... It is saturated with volitional and not intellectual moments.

op. cit.

The close connection between affect and Will is found here in an undifferentiated form.

The child who is in the period of crisis of one year, if unhappy with something, will often sit on the floor, lie on his back, throw himself on the floor and pound it with his arms and legs. In the crisis of the first year of life, the most significant feature of hypobulia consists in the non-differentiation of affect and will; i.e. the child's volitional motives stem from an instant of affect, which possesses the child at that moment. Undifferentiated affect and Will.

op. cit.

Vygotsky continues:

the crisis of age one, which, like all the critical ages, is characterised by the rapid development of affective life and marked by the first appearance in the child's affects of his proper personality—this is the first step in the development of the child's Will.

op. cit.

The fits of paralysis fade away when the infant succeeds in its first real speech act and dispenses with its autonomous speech. With this, the Ur-wir begins to open and the child can speak for itself. Its stumbling efforts to walk gradually improve as it explores the world around it. In making its first genuine speech act,

albeit with difficulty, the child has expressed its own independent Will for the first time.

#### 4. The toddler: early childhood

Between the ages of one and three, the child is colloquially called a 'toddler'. The child is now separate from the mother physically, but not *psychologically*. This is the predicament which creates the social situation of development.

A child who has begun to walk is already separate from the mother biologically but not yet psychologically separate – he still has no notion of himself as existing separately, outside of those concrete situations where he always has to deal with other people.

op. cit.

This rich and complex phase of development is nonetheless a stable phase. The toddler progresses from baby talk to the mastery of communicative speech, from conditioned reflexes to an active interest in the world and exploration of objects and their use, from crawling to toddling, able to move around in space, exploring and looking at the world from different vantage points.

Vygotsky says that it is the child's *perception* that develops first and is the neoformation which subordinates and determines the development of every other function. It is with the first communicative speech act that the child first manages to name an object in a way that makes sense in the adult language. Speech now indicates objects belonging to a certain general *type*, rather than just their immediate presence. Therewith perception itself becomes *semantic* perception, in which the visual field is structured not only by patterns of light, etc., but also by meaning. Vygotsky explains the meaning of "semantic perception" as being how a chessboard is seen by someone who knows how to play chess, as compared to an infant who only sees pieces of different shapes, colours, etc.

In conjunction with the child's active exploration and experimentation with the objects around it, these objects take on stable size, shape, and colour in the child's mind, irrespective of the conditions of perception. On the back of this semantic perception the child for the first time becomes consciously aware of the surrounding reality, though they remain conscious only of what lies within their field of vision. They remember only by recognising the object again in their field of vision, and cannot yet think or speak of an object which is not within their field of vision, and are incapable of uttering counterfactual propositions. They do not play in the proper sense of the word; when a little girl plays with a doll it is a doll, not her daughter. Toddlers are "slaves to their own visual field" (op. cit.).

An Ich appears within the Ur-wir, and in the second stage of early childhood, "the child opposes his own independent actions to shared actions with adults" (op. cit.) and the Ur-wir is dispensed with. However, the child still does not realise that adults do not see what they see. And although they now use words semantically, they do so *unconsciously*, and cannot use a word separately from what it indicates or dissect the word into its parts. "The first questions of the child appear to be immediately linked to the development of semantic perceptions of reality" (op. cit.).

Perception is strongly linked to affect and it is *affect* which links one object to another and initiates action; whatever the child sees, it wants to touch:

Early childhood is characterised by a relationship of separate functions such that a perception that is affectively coloured and therefore through the affect leads to action constitutes the dominant function and is located at the centre of the structure, and around this operate all of the other functions of consciousness.

op. cit.

The acquisition of speech changes the social situation of development. Speech is a means of communication, and its appearance changes the child's relation to its environment. The child now has an active relation to *other* people, external and collaborative, made possible by semantic perception. This brings about gradual, molecular changes in the child's relation to others in their world which eventually leads to a crisis.

### 5. The Crisis at age 3

The child is now independent of the mother physically, but not psychologically. In the crisis at three, the child emancipates itself from the psychological control of the mother and establishes a new relation to its social environment in which it is able to act independently, without the supervision and control of adults.

The form of difficulty the three-year-old manifests may be described as negativism ("the child refuses to do something, even though in some cases it is something that the child actually wishes to do"), stubbornness ("he insists on something it is not because he wants it badly but because he has asked for it") and recalcitrance ("directed against the norms ... the desire to insist on one's own desires."), self-will ("the child insists on doing things alone"), deprecation, protest or rebellion, despotism and jealousy in relation to siblings. At this stage, the child may even master sarcasm!

This crisis is known colloquially nowadays as "the terrible twos."

During early childhood, affect leads directly to action. Now, the child still wants to act, to hold their favourite toy, but this desire is now overridden by a more powerful impulse: the need to defy the adult who is offering the attractive object. The toddler could be easily manipulated by the mother who could offer the child a sweet if only the child did what she wants. The child is now determined to emancipate themselves from this psychological manipulation whether by reward, threat or command. The object of the child's Will is not the object it desires or is deprived of, but the adult who seeks to control their behaviour. This need to defy the mother also extends to norms of behaviour impacting on the child. The child must become the master of its own Will.

Vygotsky is insistent that the target of the child's rebellion is not the object of desire which has hitherto enslaved it and which they continue to desire, but the adults and especially parents who have psychological control over them.

the child is motivated in his acts not by the content of the situation itself but by his relationships with other persons. ...

What, in essence, is reconstructed during the time of crisis? The social position of the child in relation to surrounding people, to the

authority of the mother, the father.  
op. cit.

A leap in the development of the Will is required for the child at this critical stage to free itself psychologically from the mother and restructure its social relations.

This is no mechanism of volition, with the aid of which the child acquires a certain freedom in his actions; this is *a step in the development of this Will*, when this Will possesses him, when the child finds himself maximally incapable of volition.

op. cit.

The mother is the most powerful figure in the child's life; in freeing its Will from its mother, the child at the age of three liberates its Will from affect *as such*. For the first time, there is a differentiation between affect and volition and the child manages to *act contrary to its own inclination* as a result of which the child attains for the first time a real level of self-determination, of volitional activity properly so-called.

Hypobulic behaviours give place to the development of volitional behaviours in the child and form part of the moment which arrives at the age of preschool. ... Development which lacks the crisis, this is development whose result is lacking Will.

op. cit.

## 6. The preschool child (3–7)

Preschool is a stable phase of development, and not a crisis phase, so the neoformations, which include make-believe and rule-based games, do not disappear. For the preschool child, it is *memory* which is the leading neoformation. At the start of the preschool period, memory is still tied to perception but throughout this period memory develops greatly, and fosters the child's intellect and forms its basis. The preschool child thinks by remembering; the school-age child will remember by thinking.

The child masters the ideal through imagination, obtains the unobtainable through creativity, and subordinates action to intention through meaningful play.

Already freed from the domination of the Will by affect, the child now acts as they should or according to a plan, rather than responding immediately to the environment. The child has lost its childish directness and immediacy, and becomes more and more aware of their place in the world.

The preschooler develops an intellectual orientation, exhibited in its ability to play rule-based, and role-playing games, and act volitionally. As their memory develops, they are able to remember objects and events that are no longer in their field of vision.

It is the *intellect*, this new intellectual orientation made possible by the crisis at one, liberating the Will from affect, which is the central neoformation of this age. It is the development of the intellect that drives the child's interest in imaginative games, and the games which in turn foster the development of the child's intellect. The child thinks by remembering however, so the intellect is still at an early stage of development.

## 7. The Crisis at age 7

The preschool child has become increasingly *aware* of their own experience. The crisis at 7 develops when they begin to think about what they are doing, even things that they would formerly do without thinking. This brings about a kind of 'self-consciousness' in the sense of feeling naked in front of strangers or when trying to perform a new dance step. This manifests itself in exaggerated mannerisms – a shifty walk or a squeaky voice or 'fooling around', for example. They have lost their childish naïveté.

It is this awkwardness that characterises the neoformation of the crisis at age 7. Suddenly aware of the significance of their own *perezhivaniya*, they feel naked and exposed and the characteristic awkward behaviour is the way they deal with this. This transitional neo-formation fades away.

The crisis at seven resolves this difficulty through a differentiation between an outer persona and an inner self. The child learns to act in a normal way while their intellect is thinking about what is going on. Consequently, when the 7-year-old has an experience, they remember it as an experience that *they* had, rather than just as a representation of the situation. They remember its significance for themselves. They develop what could be called self-respect and self-esteem.

Thus emerges in the 7-year-old a semantic orientation to their own *perezhivaniya*. Just as a 3-year-old discovers his own relationship with other people, so too the seven-year-old discovers the fact of his own *perezhivaniya*.

The most essential features of this crisis at seven consist in what might be called the differentiation of inner and outer facets of the child's personality. What underlies the impression of naïveté and spontaneity in the child's behaviour before the crisis? Naïveté and spontaneity mean that the child outside is the same as inside; that what is inside and what is shared are little differentiated from each other.

op. cit.

The child's self begins to emerge as the child has developed an inner relation to themselves ("an angry child understands that he is angry"). The excessive self-consciousness is not lasting, but separating what the child is doing from what they are thinking or feeling, frees the Will from the immediate domination of the environment. Without this differentiation between consciousness and behaviour, life in the schoolyard would be impossible. The child can act thoughtfully and strategically. As a result, the child will be able to deal with inner conflicts and make decisions. An action is not truly an action unless it is mediated by thinking, so in this sense the Will properly so-called emerges only in this phase.

The semantic *perezhivaniya*, that is, the ability to make generalisations about one's own experiences, are retained in the school-age phase of development which follows, along with self-respect and self-esteem and interest in make-believe and rule-based games.

## 8. The (Primary) School Age Child (7–12)

The primary-school-age child already has a mature elementary memory and semantic perception, and by this age, all the psychological functions which were undifferentiated in the infant are now adequately differentiated. The intellectual moment which emerged in its embryonic form in the crisis at 7 will now dominate the development of all the psychological functions of the primary-school-age child. The child can think about what it is doing.

The central neoformation in school age is thinking; that is, the intellectualisation of functions, but not the intellectualisation of thinking itself, since this can only happen with concept formation in adolescence.

op. cit.

The development of all the other functions, such as memory, perception and attention, serve the intellectual development of the school child and become intellectualised as a result.

The preschool child thinks only by remembering, but the school-age child now remembers by thinking, that is to say, making connections between one moment and another. All the functions, in fact, collaborate in a single system of the intellect. The preschool child could remember and perceive, but they could not tell you *how* they remembered or perceived. But because all of the psychological functions are now executed thoughtfully, the child is conscious and aware of their own mental activity.

As a result, all the psychological functions are becoming *volitional*. Putting this another way, the Will of the school-age child now encompasses every aspect of his mental and physical activity ... except thinking itself.

It is a universal law that a person cannot be consciously aware of how they carry out one or another psychological function until they have already mastered it. It must first develop without conscious awareness. Thoughts are remembered better than any other material, but thinking itself is neither consciously aware nor free-willed.

In the development of school-age children nearly all psychological functions become intellectualized, i.e. become consciously construed and volitional, except for intellect itself. Intellectual operations are not consciously construed and are not volitional in this age. ... the child of school-age thinks and is capable of complex operations of thinking but is not consciously aware of thought. ... without the capacity to voluntarily make use of these operations.

op. cit.

So we can now define “conscious awareness”:

Conscious awareness consists of an act of consciousness the object of which consists in the very activity of consciousness ... to generalize one’s own psychological processes.

op. cit.

The school-age child thus develops “verbal introspection” and is able to communicate what they are thinking, and can start to make generalizations in the area of their own inner processes. Conscious awareness develops to the

degree that generalisation develops and is linked to the mastery of one's own psychological functions.

The primary school child is developing concepts, indicating conscious awareness of its own act of generalisation, but their concepts are not yet true concepts; that must wait for adolescence.

If we understand consciousness not simply as an aggregate of subjective experiences but instead understand consciousness in the strict sense of the word, going far beyond the merely psychological understanding of consciousness, and treating it as a relation to reality in the broadest sense of the word, as a relation to reality that is typical of humans, as a conscious relationship to reality. This is a general neoformation that consists of a new architecture of consciousness, one that emerges in the school child at the end of school age.

op. cit.

### 9. The Crisis at 13

The primary-school-age child is aware of their own thinking as the infant is aware of the external world, that is to say, as an undifferentiated whole. The central neoformation of the negative phase, that nowadays arises around year 8, Vygotsky refers to as *dissociation*. That is, the child begins to differentiate, or disarticulate, the memory of their various experiences, thereby making it possible to think about one of them. The child also becomes consciously aware of different aspects of their own thinking. Vygotsky compares this newfound insight to the ability to distinguish figure and background in perception, which the infant masters in the crisis at 3, but now in relation to their own thinking.

Obviously, this insight is a precondition for conscious awareness and control of their own thinking, i.e., volitional thinking, and above all the formation of true concepts. The Will now extends to the child's own thinking processes.

However, just as in crisis at age 7, becoming self-conscious in this way brings about a kind of awkwardness, and as in the crises at 1 and 3, the loss of the wholeness of consciousness brings about inner conflicts and results in a range of difficult behaviour which in the case of the crisis at 13 is called *schizothymia*.

It is in the crisis at 13 that the child first begins to take control of and become consciously aware of their own thinking, thanks to the dissociation which begins in this phase. That is to say, thinking itself now becomes volitional, an organ of the Will. This ability is a precondition for the formation of true concepts which are to be the central neoformation of adolescence.

The chaotic nature of the crisis period leaves in its wake an ability for quiet reverie and introspection once the child has mastered true concept formation. This process may extend however well into adolescence, the stable period that follows.

### 10. Adolescence, or the transitional age

Adolescence is a stable period of psychological development, but complex and uneven nonetheless. The maturation of sexual development and other important physiological changes have a considerable impact on the adolescent's

place in the world and their consciousness. They are becoming physiologically strong enough to be actors on a broader stage.

The development of the personality of the adolescent begins, according to Vygotsky, with the development of *interests* as quasi-needs which are as real as the needs which are natural or arise from the social process. The formation of interests is a neoformation which arises in the earliest stages of adolescence. I take it that 'interests' covers activities such as reading, collecting, sports, dancing, hobbies and so on.

The key to the whole problem of the psychological development of the adolescent lies in the problem of interests in the transitional age ... the basic psychology of development rests above all on the evolution of the behaviours and interests of the child, the structure of the orientation of this behaviour.

Vygotsky, 2024a

Interests are quasi-needs, orienting the person to certain activities in the world which meet a need within the person and through which they develop corresponding skills which begin to shape their personality. It seems to me that the interests of a young adolescent foreshadow the commitments of the adult, but without prefiguring them.

The emergence of sexual drives creates a chaotic phase in the adolescent's life which tends to sideline their former development of interests with the adolescent taking up new interests which may prefigure their adult commitments.

However, the central neoformation of adolescence is the capacity to form true concepts. The formation of a true concept begins with instruction and requires conscious control of the adolescent's own thinking. The mastery of true concepts matures only at the end of the stable phase of adolescence.

True concepts always belong to systems of concepts which are related to one another by hierarchies of generality and invariably have their relevance in some problem which has arisen in the past and passed on to the current generation through institutions, professions, practices, etc., in which the problem has arisen, and for which the problem remains of concern. Concepts always relate in some way to the resolution of such problems. Problems, or contradictions, can only arise where there exists some systematic practice or activity directed towards the realisation of some interest or commitment.

Such true concepts are passed on to new generations via institutional arrangements of some kind and degree. That may involve schools, universities and professional organisations, or social and political movements. But they do *not* arise from the immediate experiences of the adolescent learner. Young people have to be *taught* such true concepts.

Vygotsky refers to 'scientific concepts', but as is now widely recognised, science is but one example of institutions which create and propagate true concepts. 'True' is not meant in contrast to 'false', but rather in contrast to 'concepts' which cannot properly be called 'concepts', such as the complexes and pseudoconcepts of childhood, and everyday concepts which are vague and unstable in their meaning. A 'true' concept differs from other concepts not so much by its nature as by its path of formation. A true concept begins with an

abstract definition according to institutional norms, and becomes more concrete over time, as the many-sided meanings of concepts are acquired through life-experience.

The adolescent cannot grasp true concepts, however, without an active *interest* in the subject matter, consequently, the intellectualisation of the schoolchild's thinking in the crisis at 13 and the flowering of interests in the first phase of adolescence prepares the youth for the development of true concepts.

The infant learnt to control their own actions by using the commands their mother uses to control them to control themselves. It is thanks to the formation of concepts that attention, memory, thinking and action becomes volitional, and the adolescent mobilises the wisdom of generations to control their own activity. Literacy allows the adolescent to enhance the volitional character of their thinking, separating their use of concepts entirely from the immediate sensuous situation.

Thought has its origins in the motivating sphere of consciousness, a sphere that includes our inclinations and needs, our interests and impulses, and our affect and emotion. The affective and volitional tendency stands behind thought.

Vygotsky, 1934

True concepts are never simply descriptive or indicative; at their roots is always some problem. A true concept is only fully grasped when the problem it solved is grasped. Through the true concept, a human being draws on the striving of all the generations which have gone before and bequeathed to us by means of language inasmuch as it is connected to the practices which gave birth to the concept and has subsequently accreted increasingly more concrete meaning through the ongoing striving in relation to the same object.

## 11. The Crisis at 17

Volume 5 of the *Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky* was published in 1998 as a translation of the Russian-language *Collected Works* published in 1983. This volume includes a manuscript entitled "The Problem of Age," which covers much the same material as that covered by the 2020-2021 translations cited extensively above, but far more briefly.

At the end of Chapter 1, Vygotsky provides a list of all the crises treated above and includes at the end of the list "The crisis at 17." There is, however, nothing in that article, in the 2020-2021 translation or anywhere else which gives any indication of what crisis Vygotsky was referring to.

As a result, I shall draw on the work of the later Activity Theorists which covers later adolescence as well as adulthood. A.N. Leontyev (1945) introduced the term 'leading activity' to be understood in connection with the 'central neoformation' which is exercised by the leading activity. Vygotsky did not use the term 'leading activity' in this specific sense beyond his claim that "play is a leading activity for the preschool child" in the sense that "the child moves forward essentially through play activity" (Vygotsky, 1933).

Interaction with peers is suggested as the leading activity for older adolescents. Many, including Cole (1992, p. 107), suggest that the motive for this is sexual attraction and the search for sexual partners. Although peer interaction has

certainly played an important role in children's development up until this point, in the period of adolescence it is theorised to become the *leading* activity in terms of its motivational importance, and its power in generating adolescent development. Authors point out that adults are still important mediators of adolescents' activity during this period, only less directly than when children were younger.

According to Y.V. Karpov (2005),

Within interactions with parents, adolescents adopt social norms and values, whereas within interactions with peers they master, explore, and internalise these norms and values as their 'own' personal choices.

p. 227

Further, when I reviewed the work of all the scholars I know who work with young people of this age group, it is invariably gangs, homeless youth, or drug addicts, making it abundantly clear that this is an age-period in which people experience crisis.

I will provide my interpretation of the 'crisis at 17' but there is no consensus on this matter among Vygotsky scholars. The issue is further complicated by the fact that it is widely recognised that 'the teenager' is a product of the twentieth century, particularly its later decades. In addition, adolescents today mostly attend higher education for four or more years even for careers that never previously have been described as 'professional'.

In the Australian context, 17 roughly marks the beginning of the university entrance curriculum, in my home state of Victoria, the VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education). Students at this stage are expected to display much more maturity and interest in their future beyond school than was expected in their earlier school days.

An adult of the twenty-first century is no more or less developed than an adult of antiquity. But they are different. The way the crisis at 17 plays out in our times is most likely different from how it would have played out in Vygotsky's time or any other epoch. However, my concern here is not a universal theory of human development, but simply the experiences and character of the people of our time.

So, in outlining the dynamics of the crisis at 17 I shall be looking for psychological phenomena having the character of a critical phase of development in later adolescence as described by Vygotsky and broadly characterised above in which the neoformation:

- breaks the youth from the conditions of the previous period;
- may be difficult or awkward;
- opens the way for the central neoformations of the phase of development to follow;
- is transitory;
- is identifiable in popular culture and institutions;
- opens the way for a qualitative development of the Will.

There is a time, familiar to all parents of adolescents, when the adolescent takes as their reference group for opinions and norms of behaviour, not their parents

but their peers. This is true to some extent throughout the years of schooling, but in their late teens there is a *rupture* from the family's social position and the commitments that go with that. The teenager becomes serious, oppositional, often dangerous and exhibits a wide variety of symptoms of 'difficulty'. This is a notoriously difficult phase, as the youth "mixes with the wrong kind," has unprotected sex and may even be involved in illegal activities.

Alas, I am not in a position here and now to research this transition and its specificity but it is well-marked in popular consciousness. Teens going through the crisis at 13 exhibit a range of difficult symptoms but they tend to be inward-looking, whereas in the later period of crisis the symptoms are *outward*-looking. What we have in the later teens is marked by a temporary severing of the youth from the influence of the family in favour of the youth's ties with their peers outside the bounds of the family and sometimes even extending into different social strata.

Adolescents at this age may be at pains to distance themselves from their parents' social views and customs, not because they are 'too grown up now', but because they reject these values and express hostility towards them.

Thus the youth violently tears themselves away from the home and builds for themselves a new milieu which now operates as their reference group.

In a strong sense, the youth now liberates themselves *socially* from their parents and endeavours to make a new place for themselves in the world they have inherited. If "consciousness is my relation to my environment," then in order to truly liberate themselves from their family and the family's social position they must make their own environment – their *peer group*.

Now it must be said that not every parent experiences the horror of this period in the psychological development of their offspring as sketched above. The crisis may be much smoother, and is often quite brief and the adolescent's choice of peers may be benign. But an adolescent who moves smoothly from the family home and school to take up a career and a partner is not yet emancipated from the social conditions into which they were born. Doubtless this happens, but I would maintain that such a crisis-free move from schooldays to adult life remains a pathology.

This phase of development is recognised institutionally with a school curriculum oriented to preparation for a profession and personal autonomy.

The youth can distance themselves from their own family and social position and take control of their own social relations by selecting their own peer group, which will become the *reference group* for their relation to the world until they take up a career and/or take a partner.

But *almost* invariably, and especially if the parents practise forbearance, this period of difficulty passes and as the young adult moves on towards a career and a family of their own they patch up the rupture from their parents and exhibit some qualified affirmation of their legacy.

The youth who passes through 'the crisis at 17' may move on to several years of university and enter a profession of some kind or move directly to find a job. Life becomes serious now. The young adult must make commitments which may be lifelong. But this is not a continuation of their life under the guidance of parents and teachers. They are now making their own life in whatever ways are

made possible by their social class and must now enter into social relations which are not as voluntary as they were with their peer group, but nor as immutable as the family of their birth. They are now responsible for any crime or injury they commit, not their parents or teachers.

They have to choose a road, and their first go at choosing a path for themselves outside the family was during the 'crisis at 17'. Some will still retain ties with the friends of their youth, but with the demands of work and family they usually don't have time for them. People move on.

So the crisis at 17 is a transitional period from life under parents and teachers to taking up a career and a partner, and going on to make a living and raise a family, and all the other social duties that come with adulthood.

For those who go into years of formal education to enter a profession there is still one more difficult transitional period to come, which has been called "The Trainee Dilemma" (in press). Not everyone passes through this critical phase and not everyone becomes a professional, that is to say, someone who in their day-to-day work draws on a body of formal training acquired during years in university or some other profession training program.

I will deal with adulthood and the trainee dilemma separately. The development of the Will in these periods depends on the person's life course.

### Summary of the crises of childhood

Kretschmer ... attempted to push the teaching that the Will in the development of the child progresses through a number of stages such that each stage presents a qualitatively new formation than those it follows.

Vygotsky, 2021a

Now Kretschmer was a Fascist of the first order and no one would wish to cite him as any kind of authority, and Vygotsky bitterly denounced him. The editors of the *Pedological Works*, Kellogg and Veresov, say that "Vygotsky uses Kretschmer's holistic laws of transfer of brain functions as a framework for much of Foundations of Pedology, but he is much more critical of Kretschmer's work on the problem of age, precisely because of these biologising tendencies." However, I find that Kretschmer's observation as quoted above is indeed a theme in the "Problem of Age."

For Rousseau, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky, the Will is about freedom, not power. The conception of the Will found in Fascism is completely different to the concept of the Will used by those whose interest is human *emancipation*.

I will illustrate this in reference to each of the *critical, transitional phases* in turn.

*The crisis at birth* is a rupture in the organic process which began at the moment of conception as a part of the body of the mother, a process that continues for about six months after birth as the life of the newborn. Throughout this period one can only speak of the *natural will* – instinctual patterns of behaviour, not even conditioned reflexes. But with birth it is at least the *child's* natural will, rather than organic processes of the mother. The child has freed themselves from their mother *biologically*. The achievement of this period of crisis is the newborn's first perception of figure and background,

marked by the appearance of the smile reflex at the sound of a human voice or the sight of a human face, the beginning of the social life of the child, and the only tool in their toolbox for now.

*The crisis at one*, Vygotsky says, marks “the first step in the development of the child’s Will,” though the child’s behaviour is still governed by conditioned reflexes and the ‘pleasure principle’.

*The crisis at one* is manifested in ‘autonomous speech’ which generally fails to communicate with the adults. Mastery of speech is the achievement of the crisis at one and is manifested in the child’s first meaningful word, a word which belongs to the adult language and marks the child’s first communicative act. Autonomous speech fades away but the child has now freed themselves from the mother *physically* because they can now use words to secure the collaboration of any adult to meet their needs. At the same time, the child’s first attempts at walking will develop to reinforce their physical emancipation from the mother. Both neoformations of this phase serve the physical emancipation of the child from its mother. The child’s Will now extends to securing the collaboration of others.

In *the crisis at 3*, the child frees themselves from their mother *psychologically* by separating their Will from their inclination beginning with the child’s determination to defy their mother even when they fervently *want* to do whatever it is which pleases their mother. In the period of early childhood which follows this newfound independence from their mother a general separation of behaviour from inclination is established. They are no longer slaves of their own desires. The preschool child can Will that which it does not desire.

*The crisis at 7* is marked by the loss of childish naïveté and the development of an external persona differentiated from their inner self. They are conscious of what is their *own* experience, freed from impulses of the immediate environment. The behaviour is differentiated from their consciousness. Though not yet capable of thoughtfully controlling their own internal processes, they are now *conscious* of them, a step which will enable the school-age child to master their internal processes, such as memory, attention and so on. The Will of the school-age child becomes a thoughtful Will.

In *the crisis at 13*, the child becomes consciously aware of their own thinking process and the child begins to take control of their own thinking and can for the first time be properly said to be consciously aware of their own thinking. This opens the way for the child to learn to use true concepts and utilise the wisdom of the ages in the conscious deployment of their own activity. The Will is no longer merely thoughtful, but acts on the light of the historically acquired knowledge of the community of which they are a part. This opens the way for the young person to become a *citizen*.

In *the crisis at 17*, the young adult takes control of their own relation to their environment by freeing themselves from the domination of their family and their own *social position* and building a peer group of their own which acts as a reference group through which the young adult can craft their own position in society, and *be* a citizen.

Each crisis represents the emancipation of the child, the growth of his activity, his separation from his environment. However, such a

separation, such a differentiation, and such activities do not necessarily imply the isolation of the child, but rather imply the emergence of more complex relationships of the child.

Vygotsky, 2024

From this point on, the development of the Will will depend on the course of the person's passage through adult life. Different concepts are needed to conceptualise the development of the Will in adult life.

### Conclusion

The actor we meet at the end of this journey is well-known to us because we are ourselves such an actor. There is so much that we take for granted in how we act; it is worth having retraced this journey to see all the transformations which a simple animal, obedient to the laws of Nature, has had to undergo in order to become such an actor, not merely a prisoner of their own desires – desires implanted in us by others – someone who can indeed endure suffering in order to achieve a goal. Nor are we lone wolves who do what they do without the continuous collaboration of others and knows how to win that collaboration and work with it. We appreciate the mastery of a shared language which makes doing anything at all in the world conceivable and possible, and not being prisoners of ideology, we understand the processes of rational deliberation which we self-consciously apply to solving the problems of life. Rather than just exercising the rights and opportunities of the social class into which we were born, driven by the social prejudices of the day, we choose our own path with an aim of working with others to make the world a better place for all.

But at this point, we have just set out along this road.

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