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Objectification and the Labour of the Negative in the Origin of Human Thinking: A Response to Chris Drain

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After reading the stimulating exchange between Chris Drain (2020; 2021) and Siyaves Azeri (2020; 2021), I wanted to reply to Drain from a slightly different angle. Drain's latest response (2021) takes aim at what Vygotsky calls his general genetic law of development, which Drain suggests should be updated through an appreciation of Tomasello and Searle's concept of "joint intentionality". At the heart of Vygotsky's (1997) thought is the claim that "every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between people as an intermental category, then within the child as an intramental category" (106).

Drain takes Vygotsky to derive this from Hegel's "master-slave dialectic". Drain appears to follow Alexandre Kojève's influential interpretation of Hegel, as picked up by continental philosophers like Sartre, in which the dialectic is treated as an allegory about social antagonism. As continental thought turned against Hegel and Marx, this reading was retained and Hegel himself was associated with social subordination. As a starting point for my response, I would note that Vygotsky and Hegel are not offering a social critique here: they are making a more basic point about the process of determination as such. Radical liberal constructivist critiques of Vygotsky of the kind offered by Jones and Stetsenko (Jones 2017) follow continental philosophy and critical theory in ignoring the constructive side of Hegelian negation and recognition (Brassier 2016a).[1]

In his piece Drain (2021) outlines his line of critique in the following passage:

> My hunch is that, despite Azeri's claims to the contrary, Vygotsky's conception of the role of language in development remains a "sourly dissonant" one (Jones 2018), residing at a level of competition rather than collaboration. This poses a stark contrast to Tomasello, whose notion of joint intentionality provides a means of overcoming Vygotsky's recourse to a foundational antagonism in development (6).

In this response I would like to defend Vygotsy against the charge of being "sourly dissonant" or theoretically wanting. To do so, I follow Derry in reading Vygotsky in light of the philosophy of Robert Brandom (Derry 2013), and his Marxist appropriation by Ray Brassier.

Subjects and Joint Intentionality

Drain proposes that Vygotsky's project should be updated through the concept of *joint or collective intentionality* as it is outlined by Searle (Searle 1995) and taken up by Tomasello (Tomasello 2018). It is at least plausible to reject the assumption that Vygotsky owes a theory of intentionality from the outset. Accounts of consciousness which reject calls for such theorizing have been offered by McDowell (McDowell 1996) and applied to Vygotsky

[1] An extended critique of constructivism and situated cognition in defence of Vygotsky is offered by Derry (2013). We can add to this Brandom's thesis that everything expressed in an indexical vocabulary is already expressible in a deontic normative vocabulary (Brandom 2008).

by Bakhurst (Bakhurst 2011). Brandom does take up the question of intentionality but as we will see, understands this in Hegelian terms entirely compatible with Vygotsky's project.

Brandom and Searle agree on the importance of deontic normativity in social practice but disagree on what this involves. Tomasello spent time with Brandom at Pittsburgh and indeed Tomasello's chapter on joint intentionality, as cited by Drain, begins with a Brandom quotation (Tomasello 2018). I would argue that many of Tomasello's empirical findings could just as well be described through Brandom's concepts as through Searle's. However, I do not think that the Searlean picture is coherent, and I think this affects Tomasello's analysis of his data.

Searle is committed to naïve realism. He believes that "raw phenomenology" (Searle 2015, 200) delivers the contents of perceptual experience so that explanations like *I raised my arm and my arm went up* suffice to explain the "parallelism" between mind and world (Searle 2015, 180). Seale posits metaphysical McGuffins like "The Network" and "The Background" in place of a theory of ideality (McIntyre 1984). Such naïve realism is implied in the frictionless "we" in the concept of joint intentionality, and in Searle's approach to naturalism i.e. his "biological" explanation of consciousness. Vygotsky (1998) criticised naïve realism and parallelism throughout his work,[2] drawing on the Enlightenment tradition and Marx:

> [For Marx, science would be unnecessary] if the form of a manifestation and the essence of things coincided directly […] For this reason thinking in concepts is the most adequate method of knowing reality because it penetrates into the internal essence of things, for the nature of things is disclosed not in direct contemplation of one single object or another, but in connections and relations that are manifested in movement and development of the object, and these connect it to the rest of reality. The internal connection of things is disclosed with the help of thinking in concepts, for to develop a concept of some object means to disclose a series of connections and relations of the object with the rest of reality, to include it in a complex system of phenomena (54).

Take *The Morning Star* and *The Evening Star* as what were once the names for Venus. For Searle, seeing the two "stars" is a matter of attaching concepts to different perceptions (Searle 1971). But as Brandom argues, Hegel shows us that such mere difference in sense perception is not sufficient to give determination to an object. An object's properties must be exclusively different (Brandom 2019, 148-158). The "raw" sense perceptions must already be conceptually prefigured to draw the boundary necessary to grasp what is perceived. Hegel develops this theory of determination through negation throughout the *Phenomenology* and it is clearly present in the *master-slave* or *lordship and bondsman* section. Here too the focus is on negation and conceptual determination.[3] As Williams argues, the lesson here is not about

[2] For additional criticisms of both, see Brassier's commentary on *correlationism* and *The Myth of the Given* (Brassier 2011).

[3] This is a different but comparable type of negation and dialectical relation.

10 (3): 23-29. 2021.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-5J5

subjugation or antagonism but about the role of mediation in our relation to others (Williams 2012). Recognising another *as* another, as distinct from an object, is ultimately a process of affirmation which necessarily involves mutual recognition. The lordship and bondage dialectic describes the conditions for our autonomy as human agents and the iterative and reciprocal process of identity formation. It is not, as Drain suggests, a "dominant/subordinative dialectic" as it does not say anything about the use or misuse of power.

As Azeri lays out in the piece to which Drain is responding, this developmental picture of subjectivity is precisely what Vygotsky (1997b) is interested in in his Marxist reading of Hegel:

> [T]he child at the stage of play very unstably localizes his personality and his world view. He can be somebody else just as easily as he can be himself, just as every thing can assume any appearance, but it is remarkable that with the general ability, the instability of the child's "I" and of the things surrounding him within each game, the child distinguishes not magically, but logically between treatment of things and treatment of people (250).

This is something like Tomasello's description of the development of a "socially recursive" process through which we develop a perspective on an activity (Tomasello 2018, 72). Brandom calls this "deontic scorekeeping" and thinks of it in terms of the commitments and entitlements we iteratively assign to ourselves and others (Brandom 2009). What is powerful about Vygotsky's understanding of the subject is that it avoids the dualism many read in Searle's theory (Feser 2004). Dualism is the fate of anyone who assumes the Sartrean libertarianism of subjects who can unshackle themselves from the determinism of the rest of the universe. This aspect of Vygotsky's psychology is what Azeri is highlighting and is something Drain does not address in his response. Tomasello takes from Searle the assumption of a ready and stable subject who can recognize "common goals" in engaging in an activity. Common goals are at the heart of the theory of joint intentionality. But positing such goals is neither justified nor necessary, as Brandom's Hegelian account of deontic scorekeeping demonstrates (Brandom 2009). Searle and Tomasello here adopt the kind of precritical rationalism rejected by Vygotsky (Rajagopalan 2000).[4]

Objectification and Internalization

Drain suggests that there is a problem with Vygotsky's (1997b) understanding of joint action as a whole and the role of internalization within it. We can now have a look at an instance of this theorization:

> Children agree among themselves, "This will be a house, this will be a plate," etc […] Even in play, we find the moment that leads to emancipation of an

[4] Parallels can certainly be drawn with activity theory's focus on "motives" but it is not my intention to defend activity theory here.

> object as a sign and a gesture. Due to long use, the meaning of a gesture is transferred to objects that for the time of the game, even without corresponding gestures, begin to represent conditioned objects and relations (135).

This description resonates with Tomasello's description of a "common ground" to which children are attuned and then take a perspective on (Tomasello 2018). Vygotsky refers to such "common ground" as the ideal form of an activity (Vygotsky 2020, 78). Drain reads antagonism here because of the "directive" role of words and objects, which he contrasts with the "cooperative" account added by Tomasello. But this does not fairly characterize the scope of the theory of internalization, which as Derry has argued, Vygotsky derives from Spinoza and Marx (Derry 2013), as well as Bergson (Zavershneva and van der Veer 2018, 208).

Vygotsky's argument is that the constraints to which objects and activities bind us can also be the very basis for our freedom and creativity: objects can "crystallize imagination" (Vygotsky 2004). For Vygotsky, this is how objects develop certain affordances, but is also how we free ourselves from fixed stimulus-response relations to these affordances; for example, internalizing relations to chess pieces as an embodiment of chess practices can allow me to contravene the conventions of chess and appropriate the affordances in a new way by dreaming up new moves in the current situation (Zavershneva and van der Veer 2018, 386). The interpersonal aspect of this is "directive" in the sense that words and other objects reify practices together with certain affects and habits (Zavershneva and van der Veer 2018, 79, 489) but there is nothing "Machiavellian" about this, contrary to Drain's suggestion.[5]

To use John Haugeland's example, consider how roads reify rational practices and "direct" my driving. I may not know the way to San Jose but if I'm in a nearby state I do not need to know it or to ever hold a representation of the road in my mind. It is enough that the engineers who built the road had a representation of it. I just need to have learned to get on the road and to make sure I stay on it until I get to San Jose (Haugeland 1998, 234). Vygotsky's many examples of how the affordances of objects can be drawn on to unlock imagination and dramatic meaning (such as the appropriation of a stick to be a horse in an improvised role play) are by no means antagonistic—they point to the mediated nature of our relations.

Finding Our Way Around

The other consequence Drain draws from Vygotsky's failure to appreciate joint intentionality is that it cannot distinguish between the contents of a speech act and its force. This forgets that Vygotsy's theory of meaning is based not just on semantics but on a dialectical relation between semantics and affect which Vygotsky develops from Bergson (Zavershneva and van

[5] For another theory of how signs prepare actions and mediate relations, see Peirce (1991). Peirce was an important influence for Sellars.

10 (3): 23-29. 2021.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-5J5

der Veer 2018, 208). It is our affects as well as external stimuli and other people that orient us in the world and constitute our personality and social relations. But contra phenomenology/situated cognition (Jones 2017), for Vygotsky our affective responses, as well as our semantic generalisations must be tutored through social practice. Vygotsky gives the example of a child who is involved in a divorce or a death in the family before fully understanding what is happening (Vygotsky 2020, 73). Rey (2020) gives a Sellarsian description of such an experience:

> Returning to the example of feeling sympathy for the bereaved, we can notice that for the uninitiated, a child for instance, what comes first, before being able to understand bereavement as bereavement is mere conformity with the relevant ought-to-be rule. The trainers (her parents), slowly mold and orient her behavior so that it conforms to the uniformities of performance that are expected from a member of the community, without the child being actually aware of the complicated inferential structure that comes with the full possession of the concept of bereavement and the associated rules of action (494).

Sellars distinguishes between pattern-governed behaviour which we share with other animals and rule-governed behaviour which is the basis of our freedom (Brassier 2016b). Brassier's reading of Sellars closely echoes Vygotsky's distinction between lower and higher psychological functions and tells a similar story about objects and their effects on consciousness. Vygotsky, like Sellars, can be said to distinguish a space of reasons which humans inhabit through their enculturation in social practices (Derry 2013). This is where I depart from Azeri, for whom the real is entirely subsumed in the ideal.

Final Remarks

Vygotsky draws on Bergson and Freud as part of his appreciation of how habits and trauma reproduce certain responses in us prior to any "goals" we might form in our activity. But our freedom lies in the fact that we can form new relations to many (though never all) aspects of such activities (Zavershneva and van der Veer 2018, 137; Vygotsky 2020). Vygotsky can here also be read alongside Marx and Hegel, in their understanding of alienation and objectification:

> Indeed, we are compelled to discriminate those institutions, customs, or norms to which we are subjected and which have become mechanically compulsive for us, from those through which we are able to exercise our free conscious activity (our genus-being). The point is that this discrimination is always historically circumscribed such that successively discriminating subjection to the object (objective estrangement) blinds us to our subjection to the subject (the estrangement of externalization) that makes this discrimination. But this is an enabling subjection (Brassier 2019, 102).

It is certainly true that some of the rules and patterns which govern our behaviour are "adversarial", but what Vygotsky (unlike the critical theorists who followed him) highlights is the many constructive and emancipatory ways in which we may appropriate the constraints of our social and material world. The point, as Derry highlights in her description of the *space of reasons* is that we enter a world which is already full of norms and expectations that form the horizon of our experience. Vygotsky shares with Derry and McDowell a commitment to the conceptual mediatedness of all experience, however he also pursues a naturalist project which, like Sellars, describes the material conditions for such enculturation, as it dialectically develops in intersubjective activity.[6] This is a nuance missed by Drain and Tomasello's flattening of higher and lower psychological functions to one plane. Vygotsky would no doubt appreciate many of Tomasello's empirical findings, as Chris Drain has excellently summarized them, but he could also bring to Tomasello a critical and dialectical approach to consciousness which could help to address some of the unanswered questions in the theory of joint intentionality.

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[6] This is not a parallelism between two realms as in Searle or Dreyfus but a complex process of fossilization and plasticity of interconnected structures and functions (Vygotsky 1997a, 217-232).

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