

Mind, Language, Activity: the Problem of Consciousness and Cultural-Activity Theory

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In one of the most famous paragraphs in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein poses a question "...if a lion could speak, we could not understand him."¹ This remark is also one of the most puzzling and the most commented observations in this book. Language, consciousness, and activity seem to be connected, but it is not easy to disentangle their relation. The puzzle of Wittgenstein's remark is a sign of the difficulties which contemporary philosophy approaches the problem of consciousness.

The problem of consciousness, which was always one of the crucial issues of philosophy and psychology, has recently received new attention in the light of genetic and neuropsychological discoveries with so deep extension as to quantum theory. But even if some thinkers try to avoid accepting the necessity to choose between "dualism" (parallelism) and materialism, they have to cling anyway to at least a version of either category. For breaking up this vicious circle I would like to refer to the cultural-activity theory and to show its relevance for contemporary discussion on consciousness.

I believe that the origin of cultural-activity theory was connected with overcoming the difficulties of the then existing versions of dualism and materialism. L. S. Vygotsky and G.H. Mead believe that it is possible to maintain the objective standpoint in psychology and still accept the existence of the subjective states of mind. From a methodological point of view, they can be easily compared with the contemporary theories of consciousness that also seek objective correlates of consciousness or even try to explain its features by reducing its more "hard" facts of natural sciences. However, the founders of cultural-activity theory focus on different kinds of objectivity: objectivity of language, activity, interactions, and culture. In these spheres they look for an explanation of consciousness. Although it is hardly possible to speak of a coherent theory of consciousness developed by the founders of the cultural-activity theory, one cannot believe that they formulate some points of departure which could be useful for making an intervention in the recent controversies in this field.

I think that at least three types of such a contribution can be enumerated. First, the insights from the cultural-activity theory reveals almost entirely neglected spheres of language and social interactions. Second, they allow the bridging of the two tendencies in consciousness research. Besides this trend I have described at the beginning of my paper, there is a powerful tradition of investigating links to Freudian heritage where Lacanian ideas seem to be of the greatest importance. His idea of the close connection between unconsciousness, consciousness, and language were presented in the early works of Bakhtin on Freudianism. Third, the originators of the cultural-activity theory show the complicated relationships between activity, sensations, and higher mental functions, including language.

This notion of consciousness nevertheless demands a different concept of objectivity than is currently taken for

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

In L.S. Vygotsky's late treatise on Descartes' and Spinoza's teachings on emotions, he tries to solve the fundamental question of subjective (descriptive) and objective (explanatory) psychology; that is, he is involved precisely in the discussion of what contemporary philosophers call the relationship between first and third person approaches to mental states. Vygotsky seeks in Spinoza's philosophy an inspiration for overcoming the discrepancy between emotions understood as an expression of the higher mental functions and emotions comprehended as a result of biological mechanisms.

In this task, he was to some extent in accordance with M.M. Bakhtin whose book on Freudianism contains the main motives of the dialogical and social notion of consciousness in relatively rudimentary form.² Starting from the obvious paradox of psychological research that psychological phenomena are at the same time of subjective (first person) and objective characters (third person), he argues that the only way of overcoming this contradiction is to substitute verbal correlates for sensations. Then in fact the problem of consciousness becomes a problem of language and of different usages of language.

Bakhtin insists that what Freud takes as the struggle of motives is in reality an effect of the very complicated social situation of therapy. A therapist and a patient create a social event in which both sides have their particular interests.

Here we have at least two main points of the dialogical concept of consciousness. First, the idea that any psychological sensation has to take a form of language; and second, that any utterance is a product of a complicated social situation. Therefore, one can state that the objectivity of the mind is guaranteed by the objectivity of language, which in turn is assured by the objectivity of the social world and culture.

For psychology, the task of overcoming this apparently unbreakable obstacle is of the highest importance. I think that both L.S. Vygotsky and G.H. Mead, each of them in his own theoretical language, take on the challenge which was at their time posed by the distinction between explanatory and descriptive psychology. On the one hand, they had to confront behaviorism with its idea of the reduc-

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p.223

² This book *Freudianism* [Frejdysm] was published under the name of Bakhtin's disciple V.N. Voloshynov. I use the original Russian version published by Labyrinth in the series "Bakhtin pod maskoj" (Bakhtin under the mask) in 1993 with the commentaries by W. Makhlin. All translations are mine.

tion of all psychological functions to biologically understand activity; but on the other hand, they did not dismiss the idea of autonomy of human self and the independent existence of psychological phenomena. So I believe that their common purpose was to invent a unified scheme of explanation which could account for higher mental phenomena, as well as for elementary psychological occurrences from sensation to action.

Objective instances of culture remain for them the main point of reference for the concrete activity of an individual. For Vygotsky, they took the forms of scientific concepts and objective situation, which is a frame for the interaction between a child and an adult. G.H. Mead uses the category "biological process" for the frame of interactions at the level of biological organism and "social process" for communications at the level of conscious human being. For both thinkers, these objective instances of culture play a role of a *a priori* framework which encompasses all individual human interactions

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

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

They propose a unified scheme of explanation of human behavior which could integrate biological endowment into higher mental functions. In other words, they claim that it is possible to form a definite whole from different qualitative elements. In this respect, they can be opposed to dominant theories of human behavior and consciousness in the same degree to those which state that behavior and consciousness is accounted for by a naturalistic scheme of explanation, and to those which claim that these phenomena can be interpreted but not explained.

It assumes that social reality, objectified in the world of culture, is a frame which organizes interactions and gives them objectivity. Objectivity of culture is, of course, different from objectivity of nature, but from the point of view of an individual entering the world of culture, the social world this difference is in fact meaningless. She or he has to take for granted both worlds: that of nature and that of culture in order to participate in the world of adults.

Thomas Nagel in his influential paper *What Is Like to Be a Bat*³ discusses a question of the possibility of understanding another's state of mind. His example is of a

bat. On the one hand, a bat is a mammal, with an obvious biological connection to humankind; however, with very different type of senses (they use a kind of sonar). According to Nagel, a bat is a useful example of the difficulties we encounter when we try to approach the phenomenon of consciousness. One can understand other's experiences only through imagination which bases one's own experience. However "...it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what is like for a bat to be a bat."⁴

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

It is interesting that Thomas Nagel seems to come close to dualistic concept of consciousness suggesting that we should find an objective concept of experience independent of our subjectivity. At the end of his paper after noticed "At present we are completely unequipped to think about the subjective character of experience without relying on the imagination – without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject. This should be regarded as a challenge to form new concepts and devise a new method – an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination."⁵ However he is not able to find the ways in which such a concept could be constructed.

Answer to this question which we can find in Vygotsky's work is quite clear. He observes that theory of *Ein-führung* is wrong in stating that "...we know others insofar as we know ourselves."⁶ In fact it is also Nagel's point of view, our main obstacle to understanding what is like to be a bat lies in the impossibility for humans to imagine specific experience of bats. Vygotsky contradicts this thesis showing: "In reality it would be more correct to put it the other way around. We are conscious of ourselves because we are conscious of others and by the same method as we are conscious of others, because we are the same vis-à-vis ourselves as we are others are vis-à-vis us."⁷ Of course this concept of consciousness assumes an intimate connection between language, social world, and sensations which is rejected by the majority of analytical philosophers. Thomas Nagel gives for a support of his idea of the new notion of experience a situation of a person blind from birth. "One might try...to develop concepts that could be used to explain to a person blind from birth what it was like to see... it should be possible to devise a method of expressing in objective terms..."⁸

L.S. Vygotsky observes in his paper on consciousness that the development of speech in deaf-mutes and the development of tactile reactions in blind persons confirms the thesis that consciousness is closely connected to the development of speech and social interactions. He writes: "...the most remarkable thing is that *conscious awareness of speech and social experience emerge simultaneously and completely in parallel*...The deaf-mute

³ Thomas Nagel, „What Is Like to Be a Bat“ [in:] *Readings in Psychology of Psychology vol.1* ed. By Neil Block, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1980

⁴ Ibidem, p. 161

⁵ Ibidem, p. 166

⁶ L.S. Vygotsky, op.cit. p. 77

⁷ Ibidem, p. 77

⁸ Th. Nagel, op.cit. p. 166

learns to become conscious of himself and his movements to the extent he learns to become conscious of others.”⁹

This close relationship between language and consciousness deals also with imagination which ceases to be merely an extension of our sensation but becomes very complicated phenomenon of the intersection of sensation and knowledge. In New York Times of 16 of September 2008 there is a paper on the winners of Lasker Medical Prizes. One of them Stanley Falkow “...was honored for his discoveries that grew out of an extraordinary ability to imagine himself as a bacterium so he could view the world from the microbiological perspective.”¹⁰ It is hardly possible that this “extraordinary ability” could emerge just from intensifying sensations of normal human being. It is a complex experience which grows out of the deep knowledge of microbiological world, the ways how bacterium acts, and capacity to transfer such a knowledge into intuitive experience of what is like to be a bacterium.

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

⁹ L.S. Vygotsky, *op.cit.* p. 78

¹⁰ Lawrence K. Altman, 5 Pioneers Receive Laser Medical Prizes, New York Times, 16 September 2008