CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CRITICISMS OF VYGOTSKY’S CONCEPT OF ACTIVITY

The dialectical unity of form and content in the evolution of thinking is the beginning and end of contemporary scientific theory of speech and thought.
(Vygotsky 1931)

Before moving on to an examination of Leontyev’s Activity Theory, we should review what can be learnt from Vygotsky’s concept of activity. Vygotsky is remembered for his psychological work: formation of concepts in adolescence, child development, learning disabilities, educational psychology, memory, attention, speech, cognition and so on. Activity Theory, on the other hand, is marked by its effort to extend the scope of problems dealt with beyond the boundaries of psychology narrowly understood, using the notion of activity to describe the dynamics of social interactions and societal phenomena, and explicitly taking account of societal phenomena in its psychology. Vygotsky, on the other hand, never attempted to make critical inroads into social theory. But this does not at all mean that Vygotsky did not have a concept of activity (Davydov & Radzikovskii 1985). Vygotsky did not develop the differentiation between action and activity which we owe to Leontyev, but Vygotsky did have a concept of action and his concept of action shall play a crucial role in the critique and reconstruction of the concept of activity.

Let us just summarize what we have learnt from Goethe, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky in the earlier parts of this work about the idea of ‘unit of analysis’ (under its various names) as the starting point for a science.1 By its very nature, there can be no formula for the determination of the unit of analysis which arises, ultimately, from insight into the subject matter of the science, but three requirements for a unit of analysis may be elaborated as follows.

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1 Zinchenko (1985) and Engeström (1987) just list requirements arbitrarily, according to their own reflections on the matter, without any enquiry into the origins of this concept. It was in order to overcome these shortcomings that we have devoted such attention to the sources of CHAT prior to Vygotsky.
(1) It is the conception of a singular, indivisible thing (not a collection or combination of distinct things) (Hegel 2009 §86), but it is typically a particular genus of some universal (such as commodity relation, private property, conditioned reflex).

If we make a start from what is a collection of things, this simply means that we have not started at the real beginning, having already uncritically accepted as given the component concepts and their relation with one another. But the beginning may certainly be the intersection of two concepts, that is, a particularization of something more general. Although the concept must be a singular thing, for it to be the basis of a science, some internal tension or contradiction must be discovered within the concept.

(2) It exhibits the essential properties of a class of more developed phenomena.

The point is to discover which thing exhibits the essential properties of the class of phenomena. The discovery of the ‘cell’ is always the outcome of a search for the essential relation behind a persistent series of problems or relations. What is essential is what exhibits the problem. As a cell, it is not a typical relation, but rather the most primitive of its type, a prototype (Hegel 2009 §163). The unit of analysis poses the key problems which can be examined without presuppositions. Historical or developmental investigation helps differentiate the essential from the inessential, but the concept must be the logically first, not the first in time.

But the ‘cell’ originates from outside the science in question (Hegel 1952 §2), so as to make a finite beginning, while having its foundation in the universal. Wertsch (1985: 196) wrongly demands the opposite, taking meaning to be a property of a closed system of signs, which, being therefore foreign to consciousness, “it is not a unit for analyzing human consciousness itself.”

(3) It is itself an existent phenomenon (not a principle or axiom or hypothetical force or such like non-observable) (Davydov 1990: 282), in Goethe’s term, an Urphänomen (Goethe 1996).

A science can only base itself on something real and empirically given. But the existent thing must be captured as a concept because it is the starting point both for a real development and for the development of understanding. For example, if we understand a child’s ‘social situation of development’ simply as a collection of factors capable of influencing the prospects for a child’s development we have nothing