



# Vygotsky and Spinoza

Vesa Oittinen<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article analyzes Lev Vygotsky's attempts to utilize Spinoza's philosophical ideas in solving the methodological crisis of psychology in the 1920s and 1930s. Vygotsky had a manuscript, *Uchenie ob emocijakh*, where he scrutinized the doctrines of the effects on Descartes and Spinoza. Whilst Descartes' doctrine built on a dualistic soul versus body premise, Spinoza's starting point was monistic. Despite his clear sympathies for Spinoza's solution, which according to him was more compatible with Marxism, too, Vygotsky did not manage to finish his study. One may, indeed, doubt whether Spinoza was able to deliver the decisive key for the solution of the dualism problem, since his philosophy built on metaphysical postulates that were unacceptable to Vygotsky.

**Keywords** Lev Vygotsky · Spinoza · Cartesian dualism · Crisis in psychology · Marxist · Psychology

The “Spinoza book” plan of the renowned psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky undoubtedly belongs to the most interesting but at the same time most unknown phenomena of Spinoza's reception in the Soviet Union. In an attempt to analyze this project herein,<sup>1</sup> I am not trying to evaluate it from the point of view of professional psychology but merely to discuss its methodological and philosophical implications. I believe it necessary to mention this caveat, although Vygotsky himself undoubtedly understood his “Spinoza project” as as much a philosophical enquiry as a study in psychology.

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<sup>1</sup> Only recently has more literature on the subject become available; see, e.g., Steila (2007, pp. 63–78). The journal *Mind, Culture, Activity* published in 2018 a special issue (vol. 25, no. 4) that contains materials from a symposium on Vygotsky and Spinoza. With the exception of the article by Andrey Maidansky (2018), the focus of the papers is strictly on questions of psychology.

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✉ Vesa Oittinen  
vesa.oittinen@helsinki.fi

<sup>1</sup> Professor Emeritus, Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki, Unioninkatu 33, P.O. Box 42, 00014 Helsinki, Finland

From the beginning, it was known to Vygotsky's friends that, during his last years, he was working on a study of the psychological consequences of Spinoza's philosophy, especially of his theory of affects. He prepared a manuscript that was left unfinished at his death in 1934. The text, which consists of 20 chapters of unequal length, is not quite coherent but interrupted here and there by digressions (for example, chapter 20 deals with Bergson while chapter 12 includes a several-page-long excursion on Kant). The "Spinoza book," as it was called by those who knew of the existence of the manuscript, was only published in 1984 in the sixth volume of the collected works of Vygotsky, where it had the title *Uchënie ob emotsiyakh* (*The Doctrine of Emotions*). The editors date Vygotsky's work on the manuscript to the years 1931–1933. If this dating holds true, Vygotsky worked on his "Spinoza book" at the same time as writing his study *History of Development of Higher Psychological Functions* (1931) and another likewise unfinished book on children's psychology (1932–1934).<sup>2</sup>

The manuscript of *Doctrine of Emotions*, consisting of some 230 print pages, consists mainly of a comparison of the emotion theories of Descartes and Spinoza, although many other thinkers, such as Kant, are assessed, too. The main purpose of the comparison, for Vygotsky, was to find a key to the solution of the then-actual "crisis of psychology." That crisis, and the methodological help provided by Spinoza to settle it, is the steadily recurrent main theme of the book. Vygotsky had already in 1927 lamented "our [...] eclectic epoch" that did not provide clear methodological guidance for solving pending problems in psychology. The essence of the crisis, in Vygotsky's analysis, was that, in the science of psychology of emotions, there existed two antithetic currents: "explaining" (*erklärend*) and "understanding" (*verstehend*) psychology. These terms were coined by Wilhelm Dilthey, who with the first-mentioned methodological grasp meant research in accordance with the models provided by natural sciences (that is, following more or less the idea of a mechanical causality), and with the second the human sciences, or *Geisteswissenschaften*, which attempt to understand its objects of research in a holistic manner. Vygotsky's intention was to overcome this dualism. However, because he did not have, due to his untimely death, the opportunity to finish the manuscript, the composition of the work remains somewhat tottering. Not only does the text contain many redundancies, but even the solutions aimed at by Vygotsky remain, in the last instance, insufficiently formulated and offer several possibilities for their interpretation.

A remarkable feature is that Vygotsky does not take any explicit stance in the very lively discussion on Spinoza that took place in the USSR in the 1920s and early 1930s, although he must have known it. The discussion between "mechanists" and "dialecticians" would have been important from the viewpoint of Vygotsky's own problematics, but he does not touch upon the subject at all. This may well have been a cautionary move. Aleksandr Deborin, the figurehead of the "dialecticians," had fallen into disgrace in 1930. It seems that Vygotsky had a rather positive attitude

<sup>2</sup> See the commentaries in L. S. Vygotsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, tom 6, Moskva: Pedagogika 1984, p. 350; *Sobranie sochinenii* vol. 3, p. 354 and vol. 4, p. 412.

towards Deborin, although it of course would be wrong to call him a “Deborinite.”<sup>3</sup> Actually, it was Deborin who first stressed the significance of Spinoza’s theory of emotions for Marxism.<sup>4</sup>

## Imitatio Spinozae?

Vygotski’s acquaintance with Spinoza seems to start from an even earlier date than his engagement with Marxism. Already in his student days, he had studied Spinoza, and the book *Psychology of Art*, written in Vygotsky’s pre-Marxist phase in the early 1920s (although first published in 1965), bears as its epigraph a quotation from Spinoza, namely the scholium to prop. 2 of Part III of the *Ethics*, which states that “what the body can do no one has hitherto determined.” Vygotski ends the preface of the book by mentioning that his thought has been formed under the influence of this Spinozan epigraph, and that he has followed Spinoza in trying “not to wonder, to ridicule or to bemoan anything, but to know.” These words are a paraphrased version of the famous programmatic sentences in Spinoza’s introduction to the just-mentioned Part III of *Ethics*, namely that men generally only mock or bemoan the emotions, while he, Spinoza, tries to understand them and analyze them as objectively as if they were lines, planes, or solids.

Such an unconditioned deference to Spinoza led Vygotsky’s biographers René van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner to the assumption that he did not only embrace Spinoza’s ideas but also identified himself with Spinoza on a personal level, too. Like the Amsterdam thinker, Vygotsky was, despite his sensitivity in personal relations with others, in the last instance, an outsider and a cool observer of life. According to van der Veer and Valsiner, his maxim was that one should always attempt to master one’s emotions and subsume them under the control of the intellect.<sup>5</sup>

As support for their interpretation, van der Veer and Valsiner cite some letters from Vygotsky to his assistant N. G. Morozova, in which he advised her how to cope with her moods. “Man overcomes nature outside himself, but also in himself, this is—isn’t it—the crux of our psychology and ethics” (July 29, 1930). And in a subsequent letter a bit later: “The rule here—in a mental struggle and in the submission of unruly and strong opponents—is the same as in all submission: *divide et impera*, that is, divide and rule [...] You have to divide them [the feelings and

<sup>3</sup> For example, in a manuscript of 1929, *The Concrete Psychology of Man*, Vygotsky cited Deborin approvingly (A. A. Leont’ev, 1990, 110 sqq.).

<sup>4</sup> In the article published in Spinoza’s tercentary issue of the yearbook of the Spinoza Society in Haag, Deborin wrote, “One can certainly insist that in his doctrine of the affects, Spinoza has given an analysis of the mechanism of human personality which until today has remained unchallenged in its depth and persuasiveness” (Deborin, 1927, p. 157). True, Deborin was quick to add that Spinoza “had not connected Man with the society” (an assertion that can be doubted), but in every case the heuristic role of Spinoza as a predecessor of Marxism and especially of a materialist theory of the emotions was here stressed in a way that came very near to Vygotsky’s position in his manuscript.

<sup>5</sup> van der Veer, Valsiner (1993, p. 15): “Somehow he distanced himself from the turmoil and watched with great objectivity what was going on [...] It is tempting to explain his fascination with Spinoza by reference to this personality trait...”

moods] [...] To surmount them—that is probably the most correct expression for the mastering of emotions” (August 19, 1930).<sup>6</sup> But van der Veer and Valsiner go yet further in their interpretation: the model of *divide et impera* should have not only a personal, but even a social relevance, since it is applicable to all of human society: “In his cultural theory he [Vygotsky] attempted to sketch how cultural man attempts to overcome the ‘stikhia’ (Greek: *stoikheion*), the elemental chaos of nature, through the creation of cultural instruments.”<sup>7</sup>

This is an ingenious interpretation of Vygotsky’s motives, but it has one flaw: the strategy of suppressing and mastering the emotions by struggling against them is of Cartesian provenience. It has nothing to do with Spinoza’s strategy. According to Spinoza, it is futile and counterproductive to try to master one’s emotions merely by trying to subjugate them under the dictate of reason. As Spinoza stressed, an emotion (in Spinoza’s terminology, affect) cannot be overcome by means other than by another emotion that is more powerful and stronger (*Eth.* IV. prop. 7). It follows from this that the only way to get free from passive emotions or passions is that Reason itself must become affectuous, i.e., must turn into a desire to obtain adequate ideas. Reason and emotion are, in Spinoza, thus not contrary concepts, but rather form a continuum, which culminates in the famous *Amor Dei intellectualis*, which is a thoroughly adequate and rational way to see God in all things, but at the same time emotional, since it is a form of love. Vygotsky himself stresses this explicitly in his *Doctrine of Emotions*. He emphasizes the methodical importance of Spinoza’s solution, since most psychological theories follow Descartes’s dualism in positing reason and emotion as contraries. One of the most influential contemporary psychological theories to do so is Freudianism, which postulates—actually in a thoroughly abstract manner—an ahistorical dualism between the emotional–volitive Id and the rational Superego.

It is indeed a bit strange that van der Veer and Valsiner would impose on Vygotsky a theory of the origins of culture that should be based on the idea of the repression of an original *stikhia*<sup>8</sup> and thus actually on a Freudian motive. Vygotsky’s own intentions become quite clear from the way in which Spinoza himself explains his methodological approach in Part III of the *Ethics*:

I wish to revert to those, who would rather abuse or deride human emotions than understand them. Such persons will, doubtless think it strange that I should attempt to treat of human vice and folly geometrically [...]. However, such is my plan [...]; for nature is always the same, and everywhere one and the same in her efficacy and power of action ; that is, nature’s laws [...] are everywhere and always the same ; so that there should be one and the same method of understanding the nature of all things whatsoever [...] Thus the passions of hatred, anger, envy, and so on, considered in themselves, follow

<sup>6</sup> van der Veer, Valsiner (1993, pp. 15–16).

<sup>7</sup> van der Veer, Valsiner (1993, p. 17).

<sup>8</sup> The Russian word *stikhia* is a Church Slavonic rendering of Greek *stoikheion* (element) and means “elementary, primordial, chaotic, unordered.”

from this same necessity and efficacy of nature ; they answer to certain definite causes, through which they are understood. (*Eth.* III Praef. ad finem)

The matter in question, for Vygotsky, was the scientific explanation of the emotions. For this task, he found in Spinoza some important methodic starting points: first, the methodological *monism*, that is, the idea that the nature is overall the same, and thus its inquiry can be based on the same principles overall; second, the *materialism*, that is, that emotions shall not be explained with any other principles or causes than those present in the rest of nature. With these principles, Spinoza aimed at his immediate predecessor Descartes. Part III and some of Part IV of the *Ethics* correspond rather exactly to Descartes's *Passions de l'âme*. However, from Spinoza's comment in the preface to Part III follows even yet a third methodological postulate, which van der Veer and Valsiner have not remarked upon, maybe because it is incompatible with a Freudian theory of the emergence of culture. If nature is "everywhere and always the same" and nothing in it can be called a "flaw," then the suppression of bad emotions (the passions) is an incorrect strategy for the perfection of human personality.

## On Spinoza's doctrine of affects

From the demand of a monistic approach, it follows, in particular, that it is "impossible that man should not be a part of Nature" (*Eth.* IV.4). It follows, further, that "man is necessarily always a prey to his passions" (*hominem necessario passionibus esse semper obnoxium*) and "that he follows and obeys the general order of nature" (*communis naturae ordo*; IV.4. coroll.). And because it belongs to the nature of Reason to see the necessity of things (II.44), it is not possible that there would be any gap between the reason and the emotions that emerge and pass away according to the same laws of necessity. Due to the connection between Reason and the emotional life, one should, according to Spinoza, not simply suppress the undesirable emotions but cognize them, i.e., know how they have emerged and of which their essence consists. According to Spinoza, "[t]o all the actions, to which we are determined by emotion wherein the mind is passive, we can be determined without emotion, by reason" (IV.59). From this it follows that "[a]n emotion, which is a passion, ceases to be a passion, as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea thereof" (V.3).

Spinoza criticizes the Stoic doctrine of virtue from this point of view: "[T]he Stoics have thought, that the emotions depended absolutely on our will, and that we could absolutely govern them" (*Eth.* V praef.). This reference to the Stoics of Antiquity was not of historical interest only, since Stoic ideas played an important role in the formation of a modern concept of subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> As Spinoza is keen to note,

<sup>9</sup> Although there is not yet much research on the subject, we could mention here, e.g., the influence of the so-called Neo-Stoicists such as Justus Lipsius (d. 1606; cf. Maurach 1991, 53 and references 213 sqq.). Following the Stoic doctrine and referring to Seneca, Lipsius taught that one of the main tasks of a philosopher should consist of *meditari mortem* (meditation of death). Spinoza's well-known dictum in *Eth.* IV.67 is a direct polemical antithesis to Lipsius: "*Homo liber de nulla re minus quam de morte cogitat, et ejus sapientia non mortis, sed vitae meditatio est*" (A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is not a meditation of death, but of life). The anti-Stoic definition of philosophy

Descartes, too, had an opinion concerning the emotions that was not far from that of the Stoics: he “believed, that the mind has absolute power over its actions” (*Eth.* III praef.). As the Italian philosopher Remo Bodei quite rightly remarked, the victory of reason stands on a labile basis, if it, as the Stoics recommend, relies only on an “inner mastery” of the emotions but ignores their external causes.<sup>10</sup> Spinoza had an alternative strategy: because an emotion “can only be controlled or destroyed by another emotion contrary thereto, and with more power for controlling emotion” (IV.7), one must play the emotions against each other, taking care that the strongest emotion is that which is led by reason. From this synthesis of emotion and reason finally emerges the *Amor Dei intellectualis* that is the highest thing a man can wish for himself.

In contrast to the Stoics or Descartes, there is in the Spinozistic “economy of affects” no room for free will. The affects combine and change into others quite mechanically, and free will is for Spinoza a quite unnecessary hypothesis in explaining these processes. If we, for example, imagine that something that we love gets destroyed, we will feel sorrow, whereas conversely, if we imagine that it is preserved, we will feel pleasure, with necessity (*Eth.* III.9). No free will is involved. In a like mechanical manner, pity (*commiseratio*) excludes hate: “A thing towards which we feel pity, we cannot hate, because its suffering affects us with sorrow” (III.27). This strong determination applies to all 48 human affects, which Spinoza lists and defines. The entire Part III and the beginning of Part IV of the *Ethics* consist of a mechanistic deduction of affects. Spinoza aims above all to make the character of the affects as clear as possible. Geometry provides here the paradigm of scientific inquiry, thus the affects are treated “as if they were lines, planes or bodies.”

Spinoza’s monism aims at a cancelation of Cartesian mind–body dualism. According to Descartes, man consists of two substances, of extension and of thought. The extension is the material substance studied and analyzed by the mechanistic natural science of the early modern era. It is quantitatively divisible and measurable, determinate, and it follows the laws of mechanics. The mind (the soul), in turn, consists of a “thinking substance” (*substantia cogitans*), is free, and is not subordinated to mechanical causality. A most important trait, for Descartes, was that there was a “real distinction” between these two substances: the one could be clearly and distinctly perceived without the other, thus the two substances had nothing in common.<sup>11</sup> It was impossible for extended bodies to exert any influence on thought, and vice versa. Spinoza overcame this dualism on a general philosophical level by reducing the two Cartesian substances to attributes of one substance only, that is, of God.

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Footnote 9 (continued)

as *meditatio vitae* could, by the way, today be interpreted as a materialist alternative to Heidegger’s existentialistic philosophizing around the “*Sein zum Tode*.” This is, however, not the place to dwell further on the subject.

<sup>10</sup> Bodei (1992, p. 183).

<sup>11</sup> “*Distinctio [...] realis proprie tantum est inter duas vel plures substantias: Et has percipimus a se mutuo realiter esse distinctas, ex hoc solo, quod unam absque altera clare & distincte intelligere possumus*” Des Cartes (1656, §16).

The next step in eliminating the idea of unmotivated free will, which stuck out as a *corpus alienum* in the Cartesian psychology founded on scientific determinism, was done when Spinoza defined the concepts of action and passion in a new manner. Descartes began his psychological treatise by stipulating that that which is a passion for one subject is always an action for another subject: "... all that comes to be or happens recently, is generally called by the philosophers a 'passion' with regard to the subject to which it happens, and 'action' with regard to which causes it to occur. Although the active and passive subject [*Agens et Patiens*] often are quite different, the action and passion are always the one and same thing which has two different names" (*Passiones Animae* §1).<sup>12</sup> Action and passion thus form, according to Descartes, a relation between two subjects. As such, this is an old distinction that is found already in Aristotle, who stipulated the activity (*ergon*) of a soul as the contrary to its passivity (*pathos*; see, for example, *De Anima* 403 h).

Spinoza, too, begins his theory of affections with a definition of the concepts of *agere* and *pati*. But unlike Descartes, he does not see their difference in that they should belong to different subjects. On the contrary, the one and same subject can be active as well as passive. The difference between the states of activity and passivity consists only in the nature of the efficient cause. We have an action "when in us or outside us something takes place, of which we are the adequate cause," that is, when the result of our activity can be understood in a clear and distinct manner solely from our nature. Correspondingly, we have a passion "when in us something takes place, or follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause" (*Eth.* III, deff. 2, 3).

Thanks to this redefinition, Spinoza is able to avoid the conclusion of Descartes that the soul recipies more or less passively the actions of the body (*Pass. An.* § 2). Descartes was of the opinion that the soul (the mind) is active only insofar as it is thinking. Consequently, it must embrace the bodily and sensuous impressions from outside, which do not consist of its own thinking activity, in a passive manner. Spinoza, too, insisted that the actions of the soul of course consist of thinking only, because the soul is nothing but a *res cogitans* (cf. *Eth.* II ax. 3; 11, 12, 14 dem., 19 dem., *Eth.* III.1, III.2). But he does not connect the passions of the soul with the influence of the body as Descartes. He sees their cause in the inadequacy of the ideas which the soul has (cf. III.3). For Spinoza, the corporeality (the bodily influence) is not the cause of passions and bad affects per se, as the idealistic tradition since Antiquity suggests.<sup>13</sup> The decisive criterion is whether the soul has understood the bodily influences in an adequate manner. Spinoza's philosophy thus offers heuristically very fruitful ideas for a materialist philosophy of psychology, and in this respect is certainly worth being "imitated."

<sup>12</sup> "[...] id omne quod sit aut recenter accidit, generaliter a Philosophis appellari Passionem respectu subjecti cui accidit, & Actionem respectu illius qui in causa est ut contingat..." Here and further I will cite Descartes's *Passions de l'âme* according to the old Elzevir edition in Latin (Des Cartes 1656b) and give paragraphs instead of page numbers.

<sup>13</sup> The most extreme instance of this tradition is probably the information forwarded by Porphyrios, that Plotinos, the founder of Neoplatonism, who located the principle of evil generally in matter, was ashamed of himself because he had to be in a body (*Vita Plotini*, 1).



## Vygotsky's Spinoza book

All commentators on Vygotsky's Spinoza book have underlined the significance of Spinoza's monism for the science of psychology. This is quite understandable, if one departs from the problematics that Vygotsky faced in the psychology of the 1920s. Already in an article from 1927, with the title "The Crisis of Psychology in its Historical Significance," Vygotsky concluded, after a short review of four then relevant currents in psychology (psychoanalysis, reflexology, Gestalt psychology, and personalism), that in order to find the secure path of science, psychology needs "universal laws" as its foundation and that all the methodological ideas expressed in different currents of psychology "wait for a master-idea which comes and puts each different, particular idea in its place and indicates its importance."<sup>14</sup> A few lines later, Vygotsky explicates that the psychology must, like every branch of science sooner or later, find "highly generalized, ultimate, essentially philosophical principles" in order to overcome its crisis.

The demand for "universal laws" for the science of psychology is at the same time a statement in the discussion on psychologism.<sup>15</sup> This is a second motive in Vygotsky's book manuscript, which extends through the entire text like a red thread. While the psychologism of the *fin-de-siècle* (as, for example, Wilhelm Wundt or Theodor Lipps) was of the opinion that psychology is able to solve, remaining on the ground of a special discipline, such problems that actually belong to the domain of philosophy, so Vygotsky's viewpoint is more sophisticated. For him, the crisis of psychology cannot be solved by remaining in the confines of a special discipline only. To overcome this crisis, it is necessary to disclose the general, i.e., philosophical, premises of scientific inquiry. These premises have mostly been embraced unconsciously, and their validity has not been contested. On the other side, Vygotsky does not yet view, unlike later Soviet psychology, dialectical and historical materialism as the fixed instance of reference and the decisive philosophical judge in scientific disputes.<sup>16</sup> "The present concrete state of this theory, the enormous responsibility in

<sup>14</sup> L.S.Vygotsky, *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology*, Chapter 4, cited here according to the Internet version at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/crisis/psycr01.htm#p400> (= Vygotsky, s.a.). A "master idea" is necessary above all, because there is an "objective need for an explanatory principle and it is precisely because such a principle is needed and not available that various special principles occupy its place" (*ibid.*). The eclecticians who try to combine, for example, Marxism and Freudism, have not grasped the significance of the "master idea," which is the only way to create a coherent and unified theory (*ibid.*; the target of the eclecticism accusation is here A. R. Luria).

<sup>15</sup> This point has, to my mind, so far mostly been ignored in the literature on Vygotsky. For example, van der Veer and Valsiner speak of the "bifurcation of psychology" as a disagreement on the level of a special discipline—the "craft" of psychologists—only, without seeing any philosophical connotations (van der Veer, Valsiner 151 sqq.). In a like manner, leaving out the references to the psychologism problematics, writes Alex Kozulin (1990, p. 98). For a more comprehensive analysis of the *Psychologismusstreit*, see Schmidt (1995).

<sup>16</sup> This was agreed even by Soviet psychologists. So, for example, V. Davydov and L. Radzikhovskii constated in their paper presented at the Moscow Vygotsky Conference of 1981 that "Vygotsky worked in a complicated scientific situation, because the dialectico-materialistic solution of the problem of the ideal was not yet sufficiently explicated in the Soviet philosophy of the 1920's. It [i.e. the Soviet philosophy—V. O.] came up to outstanding results only in the 1960's and 70's, especially in the works of E. V. Ilyenkov" (Davydov, Radzikhovskii, 1981, p. 52). From a present-day point of view, one maybe cannot



using this term, the political and ideological speculation with it—all this prevents good taste from saying ‘Marxist psychology’ now. [...] In the final analysis, Marxist psychology does not yet exist.”<sup>17</sup> Exactly for this reason, it is necessary to return *ad fontes* to the classical “doctrines of the soul” of early modern philosophy.

Towards the end of his review of the situation in psychology, Vygotsky comes to the conclusion that the fundamental question of all psychology up to now is the following: Is a natural science of the soul possible at all? The question has not been answered. This is the reason why we have the psychology in two forms, in two types of science that cannot be reconciled with each other: a naturalistic science, on the one side, and a “hermeneutic” doctrine, on the other. This is a fundamental division that goes deeper than the differences between various schools of psychology. It is obvious that Vygotsky here reproduces Dilthey’s famous distinction between natural sciences (which offer explanations) and human sciences (which attempt at an “understanding” of the phenomena); actually, he refers several times to Dilthey.<sup>18</sup> The problem of psychology as a science is that it is situated as if on a mortar joint between two continents.

Seen from the viewpoint of these general methodological problems, it is not at all surprising, as van der Veer and Valsiner mean (1993, p. 356), that Vygotsky turned to Spinoza to find a key for the solution of the puzzle. That he focused expressly on the doctrine of emotions as it is presented in Part III of *Ethics* is equally understandable. Emotions are, on the one side, corporeal states that can be measured with methods and experiments of natural sciences; on the other side, they are “facts of the soul” that can be approached in an adequate manner only by means of a cultural understanding and that make up the main stuff of works of literature and art. In their duality, emotions are thus an ideal touchstone for examining the question, whether the methodological dualism between natural and human sciences (as Dilthey understood it) really is impossible to overcome.

The main exponent of explaining, i.e., towards natural sciences-oriented psychology, is for Vygotsky the theory of W. James and K. G. Lange, formulated in the 1880s. This theory departs from the assumption that the emotions and feelings arise from physiological processes. This point of view was summarized by Lange as follows: we are sad, because we cry, not the other way round. That is, the emotions are causally dependent on bodily processes. Similar ideas about the primacy of physis processes in the emergence of emotions formed the basis of the theory of emotion of the American psychologists Walter B. Cannon and Ph. Bard. Vygotsky speaks in a loathing manner about the “monstrous impropriety” of James’s formula. He makes the ironic comment that, to the question of why Socrates sat in jail at Athens, James

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Footnote 16 (continued)

claim so confidently that Soviet philosophy or Ilyenkov should have definitively settled the question of ideality. Actually, as Maidansky notes (2018, p. 359), Ilyenkov attempts to develop further the activity approach of the cultural–historical school of Soviet psychology and is thus closer to the views of A. Leontiev than to Vygotsky.

<sup>17</sup> Vygotsky s.a. chap. 14.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Vygotsky, s.a. chap. 13.

might answer only: because the muscles of his feet contracted and expanded and so brought him into the jail.<sup>19</sup>

Descriptive teleological psychology (Dilthey, Eduard Spranger, et al.), whose main philosophical suppositions were idealistic, formed the antipode to the “materialist natural science” of James and Lange. Dilthey, the initiator of this current, formulated its point of departure with his well-known sentence that we *explain* nature (and thus even our own body) but *understand* the psyche (and, consequently, even the emotions). Dilthey criticized rightfully the mechanistic theory of emotions of James and Lange and was of the opinion that it is actually a declaration of bankruptcy of its own ambitions to make of the explaining psychology an independent science, since it actually replaces psychology with physiology.<sup>20</sup>

Dilthey recommends a “teleological examination of psychological facts,” which according to Vygotsky, is a logical conclusion from the debacle of the mechanistic, causal analysis attempted by James. “An idealistic psychology becomes inevitable above all because a materialistic psychology was not able to solve the tasks standing before it.”<sup>21</sup> Although Vygotsky was of same opinion as Dilthey in many details, he could not share Dilthey’s idealistic position. A psychology designed after the principles of a Diltheyan *Geisteswissenschaft* does not offer any real alternative to a vulgar-materialistic psychology. According to Vygotsky, it accepts the mechanistic starting-point and only calls to complete it with a “teleological, descriptive analysis of the highest expressions of human spirit.”<sup>22</sup> Mechanistic and descriptive psychology are thus not at all irreconcilable adversaries; rather they are twins that presuppose each other.

And what about the philosophical background of these two psychologies? Vygotsky notes that both Lange and Dilthey, who “represent the two contradictory poles of present-day science of the human emotions,” regard Spinoza’s doctrine of emotions as their source.<sup>23</sup> However, this proximity of the recent psychology of emotions to Spinoza is an appearance only. Spinoza fought for a “naturalistic, deterministic, causal explanation of human affects,” but at the same time he is, thanks to his anti-teleologism, a “relentless opponent” of a spiritualistic and teleological psychology in the wake of Dilthey. In fact, Dilthey reproduces the spiritualistic and indeterministic side of Descartes’s philosophy, the doctrine of the *substantia cogitans* with its inherent freedom. On the other side, the materialistic and physiologic psychology molded after the model of natural sciences goes back to Descartes’s “naturalistic and mechanistic principle of interpreting the emotions.”<sup>24</sup> James and Lange thus reanimate, *nolens volens*, the Cartesian doctrine of the *substantia extensa*.

Hence, Vygotsky’s conclusion is that, although both currents of the present-day psychology take up some ideas of Spinoza, they, taken together, continue the

<sup>19</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, p. 196).

<sup>20</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, p. 197).

<sup>21</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, pp. 197–198).

<sup>22</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, p. 198).

<sup>23</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, p. 298).

<sup>24</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, p. 299).

Cartesian dualism characteristic of the modern worldview in general. That is why Vygotsky is able to constate that “the deepest core of the doctrine of Spinoza [...] consists exactly of that which is not present in either of the parts, in which the modern psychology is divided: the unity of causal explanation and the meaning of the affects for human life—the unity of a descriptive and an understanding psychology of the emotions.”<sup>25</sup>

In his manuscript, Vygotsky analyzes with scrutiny the doctrines of emotions of Descartes and Spinoza. At times, he corrects his own earlier misinterpretations.<sup>26</sup> He polemizes against Kuno Fischer, the well-known historian of philosophy, who had maintained that Spinoza continues Cartesianism, with the distinction only that he rejects Descartes’s explanation of the affects that proceeds from the unity of mind and body, and instead views them as merely psychical phenomena in the confines of the attribute of thought. Such a reading of Spinoza’s “parallelism” views the attribute of thought ultimately as a phenomenological domain of pure consciousness. This, according to Vygotsky, is an idealistic interpretation. “Staying on the parallelism means that one has not understood Spinoza all the way.”<sup>27</sup>

## The psychophysic dualism of Descartes

Although Vygotsky’s *Uchenie ob emotsiakh* is known to posterity as “The Spinoza Book,” it actually deals more with Descartes than with Spinoza. In his manuscript, Vygotsky mentions several times that he will “later” explain in more detail where the specificity of Spinoza’s doctrine of emotions lies and the extent to which it might be possible to take it as a starting-point for a new, materialistic theory of emotions. But the manuscript remains incomplete, and one does not find there the promised analysis of Spinoza. However, the disappointment of the reader is mitigated in that a brilliant analysis of the problems of Cartesian dualism in part compensates for the lacking exposition of Spinoza.

Descartes intends to treat the emotions (the affects) as psycho-physic units. However, to the reader of his *Passiones Animae* it soon becomes clear that, in the Cartesian system of emotions, the influence of the mind adds nothing new to the emotions. An example: As we saw, joy and sorrow (pleasure and pain) arise, according to Spinoza, when we *imagine* that the thing we love gets preserved or, conversely, destructed (*Eth.* III. 9: *Qui id, quod amat, destrui imaginatur, constrictabitur; si autem conservari, laetabitur*). For Descartes, on the contrary, joy (pleasure) arises

<sup>25</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, p. 301).

<sup>26</sup> An example: In the work *O psikhologicheskikh sistemakh* (1930) Vygotsky wrote that Spinoza, “in difference from the Stoics,” claimed that “man has power over his affects, that the reason is able to change the order and connection of the affects” (Vygotsky, 1984b *Sobranie sochinenii* vol. 1, 125). This is nonsense, since the case is just contrary. Spinoza repudiated the Stoic doctrine, according to which man has an absolute dominion over his affects. In the *Doctrine of the Emotions*, on the contrary, Spinoza’s point of view is described quite correctly, and now Vygotsky adds that “the opinion of Descartes is entirely the same as the teaching of the Stoics” (Vygotsky 1984a, p. 166).

<sup>27</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, p. 166).

because the veins conduct warm blood in the heart, so that the chest expands; conversely, sadness arises when blood flees from the heart, which due to this shrinks (*Pass. An.* §§109, 110). Such a “soulless,” mechanistic explanation of the emotions matches completely with the goal that Descartes set for himself in the Introduction to *Passiones Animae*: “I do not attempt at all to explain the passions in the manner of an orator or a moral philosopher, but only as it suits to a physician.”<sup>28</sup>

One of the most subtle analyses of Vygotsky is to be found in Chapter 13 of the *Uchenie ob emotsiakh*.<sup>29</sup> The chapter deals with the contradictions of the Cartesian doctrine of emotions—contradictions that in the last instance boil down to the opposition of a spiritualistic and a mechanistic principle. Descartes will show to his readers how to rein in the passions, since the ability to analyze and direct one’s own emotions is the prerequisite of virtue (*Pass. An.* §138). However, it is, according to Descartes, wrong to think that in the soul a struggle between “higher and lower sides” would take place. In the soul there are no different parts; it consists thoroughly of the activity of the will. The instinctual urges do not originate from the soul, but from the body and the *spirits animaux* (which according to Descartes are bodily, too). Everything that is in conflict with reason thus belongs to bodily functions (*Pass. An.* §47).

But, continues Descartes, there is one emotion that is of such kind that it can be used as a means against all disturbances and exaggerations that come from other emotions. This is generosity (*generositas*; cf. *Pass. An.* §§ 153, 154, 156, 161). Generous men “are full masters over their passions, especially over desires, jealousy and envy, because there is nothing independent of these men, which they would deem worthy of possessing” (§156). To be generous is for Descartes identical with “to follow virtue perfectly” (*quod est perfecte sequi virtutem*; §153).

But, as Vygotsky remarks, just here, in defining generosity, Descartes begins to enthrall himself into a *circulus vitiosus*. “I believe,” he writes in §153 of *Passiones animae*,

that true generosity, which leads a man into a highest point of a legitimate self-respect, consists only in of knowing, partly, that to him belongs nothing more than this free use of his will [...] partly again of knowing that he senses in himself a firm and constant resolution to use it in a good way, so that he never lacks the will to attempt and to execute all the things he deems to be the best.

It thus turns out that generosity is nothing else than to be aware of one’s free will. The will has its “own weapons,” which the soul uses to direct its life (cf. *Pass. An.* §48).

With this turn, Descartes restitutes at once, as Vygotsky constates, the antinomy of freedom and nature (the will versus the “bodily impulses”), which for a while seemed to be surpassed in his theory of emotions. The instrument that is used to

<sup>28</sup> “*Mihi propositum non fuisse explicare Passiones Oratorio more, imo ne quidem instar Philosophi moralis, sed solummodo ut decuit Physicum*” (*Responsio ad secundam Epistolam*, in: Renatus Des Cartes, *Passiones animae*, before the main text; quoted, too, in Vygotsky 1984a, 190–191).

<sup>29</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, 226 sqq.).

master the affects is a “transcendent” principle in the Cartesian doctrine of emotions, which in other respects is quite naturalistic. In Descartes, one finds initially a more or less mechanistic and materialistic theory of emotions, then, like a *deus ex machina*, a supranaturalistic addition in the form of an absolutely free spirit. The mind–body problem remains unsolved in Descartes. The victory of will over the emotions is a victory of the spirit over nature. Actually, Descartes reproduces the old Stoic doctrine of virtues, so sharply criticized by Spinoza.

This antinomy is constitutive for modern psychology in general: on the one side, a naturalistic behaviorism, on the other a *geisteswissenschaftliche* psychology à la Dilthey. According to Vygotsky, Spinoza is, despite all, closer to Dilthey than to the mechanistic theory of James and Lange: “In Descartes, the problem of emotions came up above all as a physiological question and as a problem of the mind–body interaction. In Spinoza, the same problem comes from the outset into sight as a problem of the relation between thought and affect, between concept and emotion. This is in the most literal sense of the word the other side of the moon, which in the Cartesian doctrine always remains invisible.” In other words, “the Spinozistic doctrine of emotions does not begin as a continuation and development of Cartesian ideas, but from working on the same problem from an opposite end.”<sup>30</sup>

The Cartesian theory of emotions is a field where the two substances, thought and extension, in some manner do interplay, despite the fact that there is, according to Descartes, a *distinctio realis* between them. Descartes concedes this himself when he wrote that “the emotions belong to the perceptions which, thanks to the close union between the soul and the body, are confuse and obscure.”<sup>31</sup> The question inevitable arises: how is this “close union” (*arctum foedus*) possible, if mind and body do have absolutely nothing in common? How is it possible for the soul to get impressions from the outside and, generally spoken, “suffer” (*pati*) from the impressions of the external bodies, as the concept of a *passion* indicates? Descartes gives his well-known answer in §31 of the *Passiones animae*. There is, he says, a certain gland in the brain, *glandula pinealis* (pineal gland), “where the operations of the soul take place in a more particular manner than elsewhere.” The soul has its place there, and when it changes the position of the pineal gland, which in turn sends the impulses to the nerves, it can steer the mechanism of the body in a corresponding manner. Not only is this hypothesis phantastic, but its inconsistency stands out immediately. The gland itself is a material body, how thus can the immaterial soul exert any influence on it? By this hypothesis, Descartes has done nothing else but relocated the insoluble mind–body problem to the gland itself.

In the preface to Part V of *Ethics*, Spinoza thus justly ironizes over the Cartesian construction: “had it been less ingenious, I would hardly have believed it to derive from such a great man.” According to Spinoza, Descartes’s flaw was that he had not explained the union between body and mind “through its proximate cause.”

<sup>30</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, 226 sqq.).

<sup>31</sup> “[...] easque esse ex numero perceptionum quas arctum foedus quod inter animam et corpus est reddit confusas & obscuras” (*Pass. An.* §27).

## How Spinoza solved the problem

How does Spinoza solve the psychophysical problem? The manuscript of Vygotsky does not, due to its incompleteness, tell us this, but it is easy to find the answer by turning to Spinoza's text: the soul (the mind, *mens*) is an idea of the body and its affections (*Eth.* II.13). It is opportune to scrutinize Spinoza's definitions more closely, since their analysis provides important clues as to why Vygotsky's "Spinoza book" in the very end remained unfinished.

The ideas express, according to Spinoza, "objectively" the same that the objects are "formally." From this, it follows that the mind is nothing else but the *esse objectiva* of the body.<sup>32</sup> This is a necessary consequence of the initial metaphysical supposition made by Spinoza, that thought and extension are but attributes, not substances, and therefore there is not any real distinction between them, as in Descartes. From the viewpoint of the one and only substance, an extended thing and its idea are "one and same thing."<sup>33</sup>

In Spinoza, one encounters, however, utterances that seem to contradict these definitions. In Proposition III.2, he writes that "the body cannot determine the mind to think, nor can the mind determine the body to motion or rest, or to anything else (if there is anything else)." It thus seems that Spinoza is distinguishing the mind and body from each other as sharply as Descartes did. Actually, he had postulated a very strict parallelism between two spheres of the substance, spheres that seem never to be able to meet each other: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (II.7). Moreover, the attributes have the property called in scholastic terminology *aseitas*, that is, they must be understood explicitly and exclusively through themselves (*a se*), so that their concept does not involve the concept of any other thing.<sup>34</sup> In this respect, the attributes are similar to the substance. These definitions need not, however, be read as contradicting the original postulate of the substantial identity of mind and body. Spinoza's mind-body parallelism denies only the *causal* relations between them, stipulating at the same time their *substantial* unity.

As we saw, Spinoza reproached Descartes in the preface of Part V of the *Ethics* for not having explained the union of mind and body by its "proximate cause." This is a bit strange since Spinoza himself had constated that there cannot be any causal

<sup>32</sup> Like Descartes, Spinoza uses yet the Scholastic terminology discussing gnoseological relations. In this terminology, the meaning of the expression "objectively" (*objective*) was almost the contrary to its present-day meaning. In Scholastic use, *esse objectiva* ("objective being") referred to the being of the object in the mind. Today we would call this "subjective being." Respectively, the expression "formal" meant for the Schoolmen roughly the same as "objective" in present-day language use.

<sup>33</sup> "So, too, a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, expressed in two ways [...].

For example, a circle existing in Nature and the idea of the existing circle –which is also in God– are one and the same thing, explicated through different attributes" (*Eth.* II.7 schol.).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Spinoza's letter to Oldenburg, September 1661: "by *attribute* I mean every thing that is conceived in itself and through itself, so that its conception does not involve the conception of any other thing [... *me per attributum intelligere omne id, quod concipitur per se et in se; adeo ut ipsius conceptus non involvat conceptum alterius rei*]."

relations between mind and body, so how could their unity have been? Maybe this is only an unlucky slip of the pen, since Spinoza's own position is, despite these ambiguous formulations, quite clear: It is the presence of God in every human mind which makes the psychophysical unity possible. Regarding how important this thesis is, it is intriguing how hesitatingly and with cryptic phrases Spinoza presents it. In *Ethics* we find the thesis more fully developed in the doctrine of *intellectus infinitus*, of which the human intellect is a part (*Eth.* I.16; II.11 coroll.).<sup>35</sup> The thesis boils down to the assertion that the human mind participates in the divine mind, and since in God thought and extension are substantially united, so they are united in the human mind, too. Here Spinoza adds that “[a]t this point our readers will no doubt find themselves in some difficulty and will think of many things that will give them pause. So I ask them to proceed slowly step by step with me, and to postpone judgment until they have read to the end” (II.11 schol.). Despite this promise, Spinoza does not explain his doctrine of infinite intellect anywhere in more depth. It seems, however, that for Spinoza, the “proximate cause” of mind–body union is to be found in God's presence in every human mind. It is as if God brings with him the moment of infinity into every singular human mind, which entails that the modi of extension correspond to the modi of thought, even though there is no causal interaction between them. This is a very strong metaphysical thesis. As I try to show below, this metaphysics is probably the main reason why Vygotsky's book on Spinoza remained unfinished. But let us first take yet again a short look at Spinoza's doctrine of emotions before we proceed to final conclusions.

In describing the psychophysical unity of body and mind, Spinoza, to begin with, insists on the parallelity of both components of man (*Eth.* II.10 coroll., II.13 coroll.), but soon slips into formulations that tacitly suggest that the body has a gnoseological priority as regards to the mind. Ideas arise in the soul only after the body has first been affected in one way or another (II.16 et seqq.), and “the mind does not know itself except insofar as it perceives ideas of affections of the body” (II.23). These “slips” are no surprise, since Spinoza is, in the gnoseological sense, a materialist who never has (like Descartes) doubted the existence of the outer world.<sup>36</sup>

But now it turns out that the doctrine of the emotions seems to be an exception in this materialist way of explanation. True, yet in the beginning of the third part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines the emotions such that their bodily side comes into sight first: “By an affect [i.e. emotion] I understand the affections of the body [*Corporis affectiones*] by which the body's power of activity is increased or diminished,

<sup>35</sup> “Hence it follows that the human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God; and therefore when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing else but this: that God—not insofar as he is infinite but insofar as he is explicated through the nature of the human mind, that is, insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human mind—has this or that idea” (*Eth.* II.11 coroll.).

<sup>36</sup> Already H. C. W. Sigwart (1839, pp. 139–142) noted these “slips” in Spinoza's text and diagnosed them rightly as a result of his “one-sided realism.” Although the attributes in Spinoza have “the same value and same dignity” in comparison with each other, this principle of equality “is not followed in the doctrine of the modi, but gets violated [...] in the manner that the modus of extension gains a certain priority and superiority. The actual existence of the mind is made dependent of the actual existence of a singular thing (*Eth.* II.11) [...] and generally taken, the existence and essence of an idea is determined by its object, but not the other way around.”



assisted or checked, together with the ideas of these affections” (III. def. 3). However, in the exposition of the system of emotions, which follows this definition, the emotions are not deduced from bodily states. It turns out that the cause of every emotion always involves some idea. The bodily affections as such do not suffice to build up an emotion. The contribution of thinking as a subjective activity is a necessary component.

Let us read, for example, proposition III.19: “He who imagines that what he loves is destroyed, will feel pain. If, however, he imagines that it is preserved, he will feel pleasure.” Here the *imagination* of the destruction of a loved object, not the physical act of destruction itself (which does not need to take place in reality at all), is the cause of the affect. In fact, the physical destruction of the loved object in the extended world cannot in principle produce an emotion in the soul, since there are no causal relations between the modi of extension and cogitation. After having treated all the important emotions, Spinoza states at the end of the exposition: “I have passed by those external affections of the body which can be observed in the case of emotions, such as trembling, pallor, sobbing, laughter, and so on, because they are related to the body without any relation to the mind” (III.59 schol. ad fin.). The psychic side of the emotions is thus for Spinoza the most important. Finally, he concludes Part III of the *Ethics* with a new “General Definition of the Emotions,” which differs from the definition given in the beginning of Part III: “The emotion, called a passive state of the soul [*Animi pathema*] is a confused idea whereby the mind affirms a greater or less force of existence of its body, or part of its body, than was previously the case, and by the occurrence of which the mind is determined to think of one thing rather than another.”

Spinoza’s theory of emotions thus deals indeed, as Vygotsky said, with “the other side of the moon,” as it underscores the meaning content of the emotions—in contrast to Descartes, whose visceral psychology of the emotions necessarily comes to the “horrific result” that we can never hope to understand “the meaning [*znachenie*] of the emotions for life and thus for the entire human consciousness.”<sup>37</sup> For Spinoza, it is ideas—that is, meanings or senses<sup>38</sup>—that constitute the different emotions, while bodily reactions are only inessential epiphenomena of the affective meanings. To top this off, the bodily reactions are unspecific: one can weep both because of joy and because of sorrow. The relation between emotion and intellect becomes central in Spinoza’s theory, while Descartes had thematized the relation of emotion and will.

<sup>37</sup> Vygotsky (1984a, p. 266). Here, Vygotsky yet uses the termini “meaning” (*znachenie*) and “sense” (*smysl*) in a varying and somewhat imprecise way. Compare *ibidem*, 195: “The basic pathos of the doctrine [of James and Lange—V. O.] consists of accepting the total and principal senselessness [*bessmyslennost*] of human emotions.”

<sup>38</sup> Mikhail Jaroshevskij constates that Vygotsky made only towards the end of his life a clear distinction between “sense” and “meaning” (cf. Yaroshevsky, 1989, 313 sqq.). In *Thought and Language*, published in 1934, the distinction is already done. Vygotsky grants the introduction of this distinction to the French researcher Frédéric Paulhan.

## Leontiev's critique of Vygotsky

Some notes of A. N. Leontiev, published as late as 1988, seem to indicate that, along with the methodological aspiration to ground a monism in psychology, there was yet another motive for Vygotsky's interest in Spinoza, namely the problem of the relation between meaning/sense and emotions. This is interesting since it would mean that Vygotsky's study of Spinoza preceded or was contemporaneous with his "semantic turn" in his last years, a turn documented above all in the book *Thought and Language* (1934). The ideas expressed in this book were a deviation from the earlier tenets of the cultural–historical psychology, which Vygotsky had been developing together with Leontiev and his other pupils. In his notes, Leontiev tries—despite later differences of opinion—to give a reliable account of the discussions he had with Vygotsky in the 1920s and 1930s. He remarks that, in his concluding years, Vygotsky was working on a "concrete and content-rich psychological theory of consciousness" that attempted at "opening again the circuit of consciousness which Descartes had closed."<sup>39</sup> And here, Spinoza would of course be an invaluable mentor.

Leontiev's assessment of the pursuits of Vygotsky is interesting, as it is as if he refuses the problematics of methodological dualism and the psychologism dispute to the task of creating a new concept of consciousness that would be able to overcome the previous dualisms. The anti-Cartesian theory of mind that Vygotsky tried to develop set out from the assumption that consciousness has a systemic quality. The "building stones" of the consciousness are composed of meanings, which are set in an ordered, developing structure. For Vygotsky, the meanings were of course about objective, outside the subject existing things or facts. In other words, the meanings were put between the thinking subject and the objective world, and the concept of "meaning" had to show how a mediation between subject and object is possible. But just this attempt of Vygotsky gave ground for Leontiev to criticize him:

In reality, the meaning does not connect the consciousness with the world of objects, but separates the consciousness from it. The meaning constitutes a 'prism', a veil which covers the whole world, the outer as well as the inner world. But maybe this veil of meanings would be the consciousness itself? In that case the main difficulty would of course go away. But it is not so, because in such an assumption the consciousness would cease to be a fact of *my life*, it would be the life of the society.<sup>40</sup>

What Leontiev wanted to say was that the subject cannot be identified with the emotions it has, and so a tripartite structure (consciousness–emotions–object) must be retained. According to him, Vygotsky had ended up in a blind alley by insisting on the importance of the concept of meaning for the research of the emotions. As a result, the processes of consciousness seemed still to move in the psychological

<sup>39</sup> A. N. Leont'ev (1994, p. 34).

<sup>40</sup> A. N. Leont'ev (1994, p. 39). Leontiev later deleted the quoted passage from his manuscript, but as it logically adheres to the trains of thought before and after, it is retained by the editors of the text.

level only so that there was no contact to the material practice. In this way, the concept of human consciousness became “intellectualized,” as the consciousness seemed to emerge from a communication between minds only. According to Leontiev, Vygotsky should have retained his earlier idea of the importance of activity for the emergence of consciousness. “The key to the morphology of consciousness lies in the morphology of activity”—this is the device of the current that begins to distance itself from Vygotsky’s explorations in the field of semiotics and later becomes known as the cultural–historical school of Soviet psychology.

These remarks of Leontiev seem to confirm Alex Kozulin’s thesis that it is problematic to claim that Leontiev and his cultural–historical school are a direct continuation of Vygotsky’s ideas.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the question is complicated and in need of further examination. In principle, it is rather obvious that the impulses from Vygotsky make possible several different lines of development that, however, do not need to contradict each other. In this paper, I am not interested in this side of the matter, but only the question of whether Leontiev’s critique of Vygotsky’s attempts to build up a theory of emotions with Spinoza’s assistance is well founded. As we just saw, an analysis of Spinoza’s doctrine of emotions led Vygotsky to the assertion that the emotions can be explained only when one pays attention to the meanings, which, so to say, trigger them. But this assertion, as justifiable as it seems, creates problems for a materialist theory of emotions. After all, meanings are in themselves nothing material but products of the mind. How then are they able to produce emotions, which have their physical (material) side, too? Should the builders, at the end of the day, abandon the stone that Spinoza’s theory of emotions seemed to offer?

## Differences between Spinoza and Vygotsky

It is true that a certain “intellectualization” of the psyche is common to both Spinoza and Vygotsky. For Vygotsky’s part, this is explained by his antipathy towards a vulgar behaviorism. So, the emphasis on the ideal component—on the meaning—in the emergence of the affects is precisely taking notice of the “other side of the moon,” of which Vygotsky praises Spinoza. But does it really follow from this emphasis, as Leontiev thinks, that the concept of meaning does not explain how the consciousness and the external world are connected, but on the contrary draws a veil between them?

One possibility to connect Vygotsky’s new ideas about the crucial role of meanings for the forming of human emotions and the whole psychical life with the activity approach would be to interpret the meanings (and concepts, too) as a kind of “psychical tools,” as Vygotsky did already around 1930. The theory of meanings and theory of activity would then be interconnected since it is of course the activity of the psyche (the mind) in which the psychical tools are used. Actually, it was no other than Spinoza who, in his *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*, spoke of

<sup>41</sup> Kozulin (1986, p. 264). In the German area, Janette Friedrich has put forth the same thesis, see Friedrich (1991, 536 sqq.).

“intellectual instruments,” which the mind uses in order to forge yet more fulfilled mental instruments.<sup>42</sup> It is even possible that Vygotsky got the impulse for his own concept of “psychic tools” from Spinoza, although the idea of the mediating role of tools undoubtedly comes from Marx.

Be this as it may, the concept of psychical or intellectual tools does not remove the initial dualism between mind and matter. As Spinoza clearly constates elsewhere, mental and material entities belong to different attributes and there is no causal interaction between them. So, by the “intellectual instruments,” we are able to produce only intellectual results, and by the material instruments, only material things.

It can thus be said that Leontiev’s critique hits the point. Vygotsky succeeded in showing in his “Spinoza book” that the emotions cannot be constituted without meanings (ideas), but he did not succeed in showing how mind and matter interact. However, this does not imply that Leontiev’s activity concept would be the solution. It, too, leaves unanswered the problem of how it is possible that an initially only material and bodily activity can transmute into an immaterial mental activity. The Cartesian dualism seems to resist all attempts to overcome it.

On the other side, despite the fact that one of the main ambitions of the unfinished Spinoza book of Vygotsky was to define more precisely the relationship between affect (emotion) and intellect, and that he appreciated Spinoza’s solution, according to which the emotions should be explained not from bodily stimuli but from ideas, there are differences between Vygotsky and Spinoza. In the first instance, Vygotsky does not share Spinoza’s intellectualism. According to Spinoza, the emotions must be connected with adequate ideas, that is, with the reason, so that they lose their “passionate” character and convert into activities of the mind (cf. *Eth.* V.3). The Spinozistic “economy of affects” starts from the requirement that the wise man (*vir sapiens*) must build up doubtless ideas about what is good or bad (*Eth.* IV.8 sqq.); then, he has to fill these ideas with an emotional content, because “naked” rational insights are not yet enough for motivation (IV.14; IV.15 sqq.). But for this process of a mental perfection to be possible, it is necessary to have already from the very beginning an adequate idea. For Spinoza this is not a problem, since he had already at the beginning of the *Ethics* stated that the human mind is “a part of the infinite intellect of God” (“...sequitur mentem humanam partem esse infiniti intellectus Dei;” II.11 coroll.).

Indeed, the *intellectus infinitus* is a necessary component of Spinoza’s system. It is so far only the participation of the human mind in the intellect of God that enables us to form adequate ideas. Thanks to the *intellectus infinitus*, God is present in every human mind. Because of this, all problems with parallelism disappear, too, since God and the infinite idea of him will completely coincide. Already the first definition of the first part of the *Ethics* states that God’s nature cannot be conceived otherwise than as existing. In other words, the coincidence of thinking and being is

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Spinoza (1972, p. 14): “...sic etiam intellectus vi sua nativa facit sibi instrumenta intellectualia, quibus alias vires acquirit ad alia opera intellectualia, et ex iis operibus alia instrumenta seu potestatem ulterius investigandi.”

ontologically grounded in God—and only in God. The problem cannot be solved on the level of the singular things or of the attributes. The Spinozistic overcoming of the Cartesian dualism of mind and body thus necessarily presupposes a metaphysical concept of God.

In Vygotsky, we do not find anything like that. Instead, we find in chapter 7 of his last work, *Thought and Language*, a beautiful metaphor of a “rain cloud”:

A thought may be compared to a cloud shedding a shower of words. Precisely because thought does not have its automatic counterpart in words, the transition from thought to word leads through meaning [...] Thought is not the superior authority in this process. Thought is not begotten by thought; it is engendered by motivation, by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions. Behind every thought there is an affective-volitional tendency.<sup>43</sup>

This passage reveals well the differences between Vygotsky and Spinoza. Vygotsky says that a thought does not arise from another thought. Spinoza’s view was almost the contrary: thoughts or ideas can arise only from other thoughts or ideas. This was stated already by the well-known “parallelism thesis” of Proposition 7 in Part II of the *Ethics*, which Spinoza yet explicates in the Corollarium: “...as long as things are considered as modes of thought, we must explicate the order of the whole of Nature, or the connection of causes, through the attribute of Thought alone.” In created Nature, that is, in the modal world, it is not possible that bodies determine the mind to thinking or, vice versa, that ideas determine the bodies to motion (*Eth.* III.1). The parallelism gets sublated only in God, since “all ideas, which are in God, agree completely with the objects of which they are ideas” (*Eth.* II.32 dem.). The human mind does not initially have any adequate knowledge of things outside itself, but it must resort to the *intellectus infinitus*, which is the source of adequacy. We are able to form (adequate) ideas about the objects only insofar God has these same ideas in his infinite intellect. God is present in every mental act producing adequate ideas.

Martial Gueroult hit the point when saying that, because of this metaphysical solution, the human mind plays in the demonstrations of the *Ethics* in no way the role of an empirical subject, but presents itself as an ontological entity—it is, actually, nothing else but “God, insofar he constitutes the essence of mind.”<sup>44</sup> When thus Vygotsky, as we saw above, reprehended Kuno Fischer because he insisted on the “parallelism” of Spinoza, he was only partially right. In Spinoza, there is indeed a strict parallelism on the level of the attributes, which can be removed only by introducing God (the Substance) and his infinite intellect.

It is clear that Vygotsky cannot here follow Spinoza, already because he was looking for a psychological not metaphysical concept of mind. He says expressly that, behind every thought, there is an affective or volitional tendency, that is, bodily dispositions, which exert influence upon the process of thinking. Vygotsky thus insists on a mind–body continuum in every individual and does not resort, like Spinoza, to such additional constructs as God. And although the social (supraindividual)

<sup>43</sup> Vygotsky (251 sqq.).

<sup>44</sup> Gueroult (1974, p. 117).

determination of human thinking always remains in the focus of Vygotsky, this supraindividual factor has a social and historical character; it does not have the form of an unhistorical and timeless *intellectus infinitus*, as in Spinoza.

In sum, Leontiev was right when he said that the problem that Vygotsky set himself—the problem of the relation between emotion and intellect—could not be solved on the basis of Spinoza’s doctrine alone. However, the unsolvability of the task was due to other reasons than Leontiev thought. The problem did not lie in the concept of meaning, nor in the assertion that the consciousness was a result of mental communication only. The main reason why the psychophysical problem could not be solved was that Spinoza’s solution of the mind–body dualism, as commendable as the attempt was, relied upon such metaphysical presuppositions which did not help in the project of creating a scientific psychology. This was the reason why Vygotsky could not embrace Spinoza’s philosophy in its entirety but took only some important ideas from it selectively.

However, even the fragments from Spinoza’s doctrine made it possible for Vygotsky to produce new and fruitful theoretical drafts. In a fragment from 1933 with the title *Problema soznaniya* (The Problem of Consciousness), Vygotsky defined his own theory as a “psychology of heights” (*vershinnaya psikhologiya*), in contrast to the “shallow psychology.”<sup>45</sup> With this definition, he wanted to say that a psychological theory should not start from “below,” as for example the Freudian theory does when it takes the unconscious as its point of departure. Instead, the theory must start from “above,” from the highest organizing principle, which sets the structure of all psychic life. As an example of this procedure of starting “from above,” one can take a further manuscript, *O psikhologicheskikh sistemakh* (On Psychological Systems) that was not published in Vygotsky’s lifetime. Here he seizes one well-known Spinozistic idea and applies it to his own concept of psychic systems:

We see in the most developed men, who, from an ethical point of view, are most perfect personalities and have a beautiful inner life, a system in action, where everything is directed towards one goal. Spinoza had sketched a theory (which I will slightly transform) which says that the mind is capable to concentrate all its expressions and all its states towards one goal. A system with an unitary center, a maximal focusing of human conduct will thus arise. For Spinoza, this unifying idea is the idea of God or Nature. From a psychological point of view, it is not necessary to maintain just this [idea of Spinoza]. But man is really capable of systemating not only some functions, but even of creating an unitary center point for the whole system. Spinoza showed this on the philosophical level; there are men who have devoted themselves in an exemplary manner for some goal, men who have shown in practice that something like this is possible. The psychology faces the task of proving the scientific truth of how such unitary systems arise.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> L. S. Vygotsky (1984c, p. 166).

<sup>46</sup> L. S. Vygotsky (1984b, p. 131).

The locus in Spinoza to which Vygotsky refers is proposition V. 14 of the *Ethics*: “The mind can bring it about that all the affections of the body—i.e. images of things—are related to the idea of God.” This is possible because the mind, which participates in the infinite idea of God, has the ability to form adequate ideas. And because adequate ideas necessarily involve God, they must refer to him (cf. *Eth.* II.45, II.46). Further, because the forming of adequate ideas means a transition into a higher stage of perfection (cf. *Eth.* III.11 schol.; IV.45 coroll. 2 schol.), men experience joy (*laetitia*) doing this. This joy that involves God is nothing else but an intellectual love of God and the highest thing that we from a rational point of view can desire: *Hic erga Deum Amor summum bonum est, quod ex dictamine rationis appetere possumus* (V.20 dem).

For Spinoza, the “uniting idea” of *amor Dei* (the idea of God turned into an emotion) served a philosophical strategy of human salvation. For Vygotsky, in turn, the “unifying ideas” that build up the structure of personality are the subject matter of a “psychology of heights” of a new kind, a theory that sets up as its task to study the development of meanings. The goal, intellectualization of emotions, is the same as in Spinoza, but for Vygotsky there is no need to recur to some general philosophical idea, be it the idea of God, Substance, or something else. This, too, can be seen as a position taken in the so-called psychologism controversy: the science of psychology shall, according to Vygotsky, not have any metaphysical aspirations and the domains of philosophy and psychology must, as a last resort, remain separated. Spinoza is for Vygotsky not the headstone par excellence, but only one of the building stones.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that there are no conflict of interest.

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