

The Roots, Trunk and Crown of the Psychology of Activity¹

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The text is a review of the historical and theoretical book by E.E. Sokolova Psychology of activity: formation and prospects of development. The panorama of the ideas of the psychology of activity is reproduced based on the historical and logical foundations of the concept of activity in philosophy and psychology. These ideas are revealed in the context of the polylogue of scientists within the A.N. Leontiev school and its wide reference circle. Special attention is paid to the understanding of activity as *causa sui* as opposed to its mechanistic interpretation. The contradictions and paradoxes of activity are considered, through the fixation and resolution of which the way of thinking that characterizes the theory of A.N. Leontiev was formed.

Keywords: activity, theory of activity, history, substance, *causa sui*.

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Корни, ствол и крона психологии деятельности²

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Текст представляет собой рецензию на историко-теоретическую книгу Е.Е. Соколовой «Психология деятельности: становление и перспективы развития». Панорама идей психологии деятельности воспроизведена с опорой на исторические и логические основания понятия деятельности в философии и психологии. Эти идеи раскрываются в контексте полилога ученых внутри школы А.Н. Леонтьева и ее широкого референтного круга. Особое внимание уделяется пониманию деятельности как *causa sui* в противовес ее механистическому толкованию. Рассматриваются противоречия и парадоксы деятельности, через фиксацию и разрешение которых складывался способ мышления, характеризующий теорию А.Н. Леонтьева.

Ключевые слова: деятельность, теория деятельности, история, субстанция, *causa sui*.

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¹ Review of the book: *Sokolova E.E. Psikhologiya deyatel'nosti: stanovlenie i perspektivy razvitiya*. Moscow: Kanon+ ROOI «Reabilitatsiya». 2023. 496 p.

² Рецензия на кн.: *Соколова Е.Е. Психология деятельности: становление и перспективы развития*. М.: Канон+ РООИ «Реабилитация», 2023. 496 с.

V.P. Zinchenko once noted that psychology, according to A.N. Leontiev, should grow “not into a bush, but into a trunk”. Be that as it may, in fact, the trunk of psychological activity theory has over time grown into a powerful crown, some branches of which resemble independent trunks. We will not enumerate the directions and names. And the explanation for this should be sought not in the trunk, but in the roots. In the very *way of thinking* that characterizes the activity theory. An analysis of this way is done in E.E. Sokolova’s fundamental historical and theoretical study — in her searches one can see an encyclopedism unthinkable in today’s times.

A.N. Leontiev’s activity theory is sometimes called *psychological (general psychological)*. It is implicitly assumed that it presents an understanding of activity as a *psychological phenomenon*. In fact A.N. Leontiev studies the *phenomenon of activity as such*, but in psychological concepts with the preserved philosophical and anthropological quintessence of its analysis by the classics of German dialectics (Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Feuerbach) and Marx. We can find in Leontiev’s works an enrichment of this quintessence. K. Marx has a captivatingly simple, but at the same time revolutionary formula for socio-humanitarian knowledge: history is “the activity of an individual pursuing his own goals”. A perspective on history (the humanity’s activity) in the optics of goal-seeking still sets the horizon of human knowledge. History, as the history of activity’s ends, always at odds, according to Hegel, with its results, is an alluring prospect for the human sciences. We know it as the history of human’s achievements and (less frequently) defeats in the human world creation, into the conception of which he inscribes the rest of the world available to him. Not having understood the nature of goal-setting, its development, contradictions and paradoxes within activity theory. A.N. Leontiev has already done this. Influenced by his works, V.V. Davydov once proclaimed goal-setting to be a subject of psychology. A human always comes from the future, from the world of goals. It is not by chance that a genuine goal is realized when the result is achieved and the gap between what has been planned and what has been done opens. The paradoxical metamorphoses in the goal formation processes is one of A.N. Leontiev’s activity theory’s leitmotifs (this line was later developed by O.K. Tikhomirov and his school on the basis of creativity research, which is quite natural). Here is both a challenge and an answer to many questions of modern humanitarianism.

A.N. Leontiev’s conception was at times banalized, being reduced to a set of self-evident propositions according to the level of accessibility to interpreters, or rather, to their time. But Leontiev’s texts are arranged in a complex and “artful” way. Some of the bases of the streams of thought were not explicit even for the author

himself (which is natural for thinking). In some instances, Alexei Nikolaevich thought not in “sentences”, but in “word combinations” and even in “words”. Let us take, for example, the well-known position on the relationship between individual activity and generic activity: the former must be *adequate*, but *not identical* with the latter. Leontiev does not mean that one activity cannot be understood as a mere copy of the other. In the mismatch of “adequacy” and “non-identity” lies the main problem, which A.N. Leontiev raised in his book “Activity. Consciousness. Personality” — it is the *problem of activity development*. It was picked up, in various ways, by psychologists such as V.V. Davydov, A.G. Asmolov, V.A. Petrovsky and others, who have offered their own variants of its solution. The situational, though always natural, “shift of the motive to the purpose” (and this is one of activity development’s key mechanisms) can become tectonic in individual consciousness, radically, sometimes irreversibly, changing the way a human relates to the world and to himself.

E.E. Sokolova’s book is about the *potential* of activity theory for the development of human sciences in the 21st century. It is very important to note that E.E. Sokolova explores not the “paradigm evolution” but the historical logic of the “activity development” in building the activity theory — **ab ovo usque ad mala**, the theory that is still in the *formation* process (this term in the title of the book has not only “historical meaning”).

E.E. Sokolova’s work shows the image of this developing whole with the coverage of its development’s sources, including implicit ones. For all its rigid integrity maintained by the author, the study is deployed in the broadest historical perspective with comprehension of the presented genetic panorama’s each fragment. There are no “non-shooting guns” in the work. Therefore, it is not possible to cover all significant nuances (and they are all significant) in the journal review format. So I will limit myself to the most important nuance, in my opinion.

The author convinces the reader that the key to the originality of the methodology of “non-classical psychology”, which is cultural-historical and theoretical-activity psychology, should be sought in Classical-Dialectical philosophy — a tradition of theorizing rooted in Spinoza’s philosophy. As Hegel wrote, “Spinozism is first of all philosophizing”, a historical and logical beginning. Even E.V. Ilyenkov, the eminent Spinozist philosopher of the 20th century, described Fichte as “Spinoza in reverse”. A.N. Leontiev’s “Implicit Spinozism” is one of the most interesting subjects in E.E. Sokolova’s monograph. By the way, E.V. Ilyenkov and A.N. Leontiev were close friends — but not only friends, they were also colleagues who thought together about problems of theoretical psychology. It is not difficult to find their traces in both authors’ published texts, though much remained in conversations that we will never hear. And K. Marx was im-

portant to them insofar as he was a Spinozist (for Ilyenkov, also a Hegelian).

L.S. Vygotsky saw the beginning and the ideal of scientific psychology in Spinozism (respectively – in Marxism) – the only thing that could be opposed in his science, as well as in philosophy, to Cartesianism, which is not only still alive today, but is in some ways experiencing its second birth in the 21st century. Although Cartesianism went west a century ago along with... Bergson's philosophy. A.M. Pyatigorsky is right: Bergsonianism is the “end” of modern European philosophy, in the sense that it is the summation of all the dead ends into which Descartes led it. From this point of view, Pyatigorsky's characterization of Bergsonianism as a return to Cartesianism – which continued afterwards, but precisely through Bergson, in philosophy in the second half of the 20th century – is absolutely fair.

Bergson, however, might have had hope of breaking Cartesian deadlocks. It is in this famous formula: “Our mind is metal extracted from form, and form is our action”. But this form seems, in Bergson's interpretation, to have been too narrow for such metal to be extracted from it. Bergson's thought resembles a silent, panting “Spinozian” song that has been “stepped on its throat” by immobilizing its vocal apparatus.

L.S. Vygotsky fought against Cartesianism in all his theoretical-psychological texts in one way or another, gained victories, but failed to create a Spinozian psychology. N.A. Bernstein, who “fought” not at all with I.P. Pavlov (he tirelessly emphasized Pavlov's greatness as a psychologist), but with the way of thinking that underlines his theory, directly characterizing this way as Cartesian, later waged a struggle on the adjacent physiological “front”.

A.N. Leontiev and S.L. Rubinstein created two versions of monistic Spinozian psychology – and this is what brings them together, despite all their differences. E.E. Sokolova comes exactly to this principal conclusion and gives a convincing argumentation of it. (We contrasted Vygotsky and Rubinstein, but one had Spinoza's portrait on his office wall, while in the other scientist's diaries he topped the list of major philosophers).

E.E. Sokolova reconstructs the grounds on which A.N. Leontiev interpreted activity as the *substance* of the mental. And thus she proves the groundlessness of A.N. Leontiev's accusations of mechanistic “activity reductionism” (where activity is simply substituted for “behavior”) – behind these accusations lies the traditional understanding of substance. But Spinozian substance is *causa sui*, the cause of itself. The traditional understanding of substance is Cartesian in origin, framed in the coordinates of stimuli-stressors and reactions.

Stephen Covey, a well-known American organizational consultant, read a phrase in a book (he did not name the source) that he claims changed his life: “There is a gap between a stimulus and our reaction. Our freedom and our ability to choose our reaction lies in this gap. Our development and happiness depend on it”³. But even by filling the gap between “stimulus” and “reaction” with “freedom” and “ability to choose” we will not get far from neo-behaviorism. Edward Tolman would simply call it *intervening variables*.

This is the point: as soon as “freedom” (which, incidentally, is not reducible to the implementation of a wide variety of choices) is asserted, the “stressor” ceases to be a “stressor” and the “reaction” ceases to be a “reaction”. The “stressor” no longer “stresses”, but makes one think, as it turns into a problem, and problem turns into a task. The “reaction” loses its prefix and becomes “action”, in the limit, creativity. The “action” is not chosen, but is produced, created by itself (N.A. Bernstein, V.P. Zinchenko, M. Cole and B.D. Elkonin have discussed this). The “solution of a problem” is only one of this process results, and often there is no happiness in it, which can be “overslept” – together with “development”, with what has changed in you.

Yes, Leontiev puts “activity” between S and R. After discussing the book “Activity. Consciousness. Personality” in 1975, his generally “sympathizers” F.T. Mikhailov (I tell from his words), A.S. Arseniev, A.V. Brushlinsky approached him with bewilderment: “Alexei Nikolaeovich, what have you done? You only strengthened the positions of behaviorism with the concept of activity?”. They were right. By introducing the concept of activity, in A.N. Leontiev's (and S.L. Rubinstein's) interpretation, the picture of the human world is freed from the dictate of stimuli and the obsequiousness of reactions. They simply do not fit into it. Leontiev took this radical “liberating step” by keeping the behaviorist terminology “to the side”. “The same ones and Sophia” (as in Gribodov – “the same” ones are no longer the same!)

Certainly, one must understand that A.N. Leontiev did this while arguing with behaviorists. Outside this context, this substitution is meaningless. Leontiev thought of human activity only inside the organism of culture, which is created by it, and, of course, he did not consider culture as a set of special – “social” stimuli. Hence, at least, his reproach to J. Piaget, who saw thinking as a human's specific mechanism of homeostasis: it makes no sense to talk about “equilibrium with the concept” that a child masters, A.N. Leontiev wrote.

The “stimuli-stressors” and “reactions” have no place today even in psychophysics, which has dealt with them throughout its historical road from Fechner to Stevens.

³ Kovi S [Covey S.J. Sem' navykov vysokoeffektivnykh lyudei: Moshchnye instrumenty razvitiya lichnosti [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change]. Moscow. 2009, p. 34.

Experiments show that the thresholds of elementary sensitivity (for example, pain sensitivity) can shift up or down in a person depending on what task and how he solves it, how significant for him is the situation in which the “stimulus” occurs. K.V. Bardin has created an entire area of psychophysics to describe and explain these phenomena. And any mother will confirm that a child’s bruise is twice as painful from annoyance, from resentment. And we, blowing on the bruised spot, hit the “bad chair”, which should not have been here and get in the baby’s way in this wonderful safe world called “nursery”. A small sphere of the big world called “human subjectivity” (according to Leontiev, “the constitutive characteristic of activity”).

The world of meanings, where only a child’s or a person’s own “powers”, powers that have yet to become, in Marx’s words, “essential”, generic, and therefore, by definition, free, are endowed with semantic weight. At the cost of *special efforts* on the part of those who master these forces. A.N. Leontiev’s theory is all about individual efforts to master generic, essential forces, the productive “energy” of human activity. This also follows from E.E. Sokolova’s analysis.

Certainly, the author could not avoid the debatable issue of L.S. Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory’s and A.N. Leontiev’s activity approach’s correlation. Their continuity is shown on the pages not in the form of statement of coincidence and consonance, but in the form of development which assumes “keeping” dialectic opposites and consequently does not close the possibility of further movement in the discussion field.

For example, Vygotsky’s semantic structure of consciousness turns into semantic activity “traces” in A.N. Leontiev’s works, which allows this structure to be organized in a special way. E.E. Sokolova absolutely rightly calls A.N. Leontiev’s theory “activity-meaning”. It points to its originality, permitting it to be clearly and unambiguously singled out among other (including “daughter”) versions of the activity approach.

According to A.N. Leontiev, psyche is not just an “image” but always a “sense-image” (Ya.L. Golosovker’s term) of the world, without which the “image of the world” will remain fragmented. Meanwhile, individ-

ual activity is a tool of search and production of sense in order to insert it into what is already endowed with meaning in the process of generic activity’s historical development. “Meaning-making” always actualizes the activity results “with meaning”. But, after all, its generation — culture — is not only that which is “valid”, it is also that which makes each of the people in absentia not indifferent to each other. Hence there is the cultural objectification of senses, not only meanings. A.N. Leontiev even named the activity sphere in which senses are objectivized (being completed!) and transmitted across the generations. It is art, from the analysis of which L.S. Vygotsky, not by chance, began constructing his “non-classical”, objective, psychology, penetrating into the mysteries of the birth of the ultimate “subjective”, the most intimate thing — human experience.

Similarly, A.N. Leontiev does not reduce the personality to a “system of activities” but expands the boundaries of the personal world to the scale of the larger human world through activity, without losing its profound originality. Moreover, analogous to Vygotsky, it is a movement from “apical psychology” to “depth” one, not of the Freudian type.

Hence the need for “systemic”, as E.E. Sokolova puts it, monism. Monism is a question of truth, which is “always concrete” (according to the author, “systemic”), and pluralism is a question of opinions. Their broadest panorama is also presented in the work.

The connection of A.N. Leontiev’s activity theory with other attempts to build psychological concepts based on this definition — they belong to S.L. Rubinstein, P.Ya. Galperin, D.B. Elkonin, etc. — is revealed in a most interesting way in the book. Against this background, these authors’ contributions to the undoubtedly “common cause” (for all the sometimes acute discussions they had with each other) become much more prominent.

In E.E. Sokolova’s theoretical-historical study the reader is presented not only with the roots, trunk and crown of the tree of psychological activity theory, but at the same time with the environment where it has sprouted and continues to grow. The tree is evergreen, which the book also convinces of.

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