The “I” Status in the Cultural and Activity Discourse

Vadim A. Petrovsky
National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5931-0738, e-mail: vpetrovsky@hse.ru

The concept of the I that is present in the scholarly and mundane consciousness is inwardly paradoxical, as it contains the risk of regression to “bad infinity”. Thus, “I see an object” obviously creates in me the image of the object; by implication, “someone” inside me sees the image of the perceived object and, consequently, an image of the image, which has just arisen, emerges then; this new image further transforms into an object of internal perception, and so on and so forth, “to infinity”. The same logic of regression into bad infinity applies to the individual’s experiences and aspirations regressing into the far reaches of the Transcendental I. An alternative to such an understanding forms a viewpoint on the I as a dynamic whole in the unity of its four modes, “the Existential I”, “the Phenomenological I”, “the Presuming I”, and the “Self-valuable I”. The assumed fact that initially there is “someone” “in me”, as part of the Phenomenological I, that “feels”, “looks”, “acts” and “experiences”, is revised. It is surmised that the assumed (imaginary) I becomes real (acquires agency) through the mediation of the individual’s contacts with his or her environment. The four modes of the I are generated through the individual’s activity manifested in various ways (search, imitation, purposeful activity and supra-adaptive activity). The involvement of the I in the culture and activity discourse enables the unified interpretation of concepts that are present in philosophical and psychological systems that are significantly different in their premises.

Keywords: activity, the culture and approach, the Existential I, the Phenomenological I, the Presuming I, and the Self-valuable I.


О статусе «Я» в культурно-деятельностном дискурсе

В.А. Петровский
Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики» (ФГАОУ ВО «НИУ ВШЭ», г. Москва, Российская Федерация
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5931-0738, e-mail: vpetrovsky@hse.ru

Присутствующая в научном и обыденном сознании идея Я внутренне парадоксальна, заключая в себе риск регресса в «дурную бесконечность». Так, «Я вижу объект» с очевидностью рождает во мне образ объекта; предположительно, при этом «кто-то» внутри меня видит образ воспринятого объекта и, следовательно, далее рождается образ только что возникшего образа; далее этот новый образ превращается в объект внутреннего восприятия и т. д. и т. п., «до бесконечности». Та же логика регресса в «дурную бесконечность» относится к переживаниям и стремлениям индивида, регрессируя в дали трансцендентального Я. Альтернативу подобному пониманию образует взгляд на Я как динамическое целое в единстве четырех его модусов — «эксистенциальное Я», «феноменальное Я», «полагающее Я» и «самоценное Я». Преодолевается мнимость того, что будто изначально «во мне», в составе феноменального Я, есть «кто-то», кто «смотрит», «действует», «переживает». Предполагается, что мнимое Я, опосредуя контакты индивида с его окружением, обретает действительность (субъектность). Источник порождения четырех модусов Я — деятельность индивида в разнообразных про-

1 The article is based on the author's speech at a conference dedicated to A.N. Leontiev’s 120th anniversary (the oral form of narration is preserved).
2 В основе статьи — выступление автора на конференции, посвященной 120-летию А.Н. Леонтьева (сохраняется устная форма повествования).
This paper aims to outline how the I is interpreted with regard to the activity, or more precisely the cultural-activity approach (A.G. Asmolov et al.). Phenomenologically, the I — partly incognito, without self-promotion — appears in every psychological construction when one speaks of activity and consciousness, as if there is always someone who acts, contemplates, thinks, experiences, strives. In other words, “activity” in ordinary consciousness is what I do (remember the old Russian word deй); “consciousness” is what I have. We often prefer not to think about the fact that activity, according to G.P. Shchedrovitsky [21], can be “impersonal” and that consciousness, as V.P. Zinchenko says [2], is nobody’s, or rather, we suppress this idea as something unusual or discouraging (“What do you mean by “impersonal”?; “What do you mean by “nobody’s”?!?”)

However, there is a problem here! For example, when we talk about psychic phenomena, the question remains: who are these phenomena to? This is what S.L. Rubinstein writes in “Fundamentals of General Psychology”: “Our perceptions, thoughts, feelings, our aspirations, intentions, desires etc”. — all of these are “... given to us directly, as if they were experience”... “Belonging to the individual experiencing them, to the subject, is the first characteristic feature of all the psychic” [17, p. 19].

But this is precisely the point at which the question is valid. If the psychic contents are always given to me, as a bodily individual (subject), as a unique I, then such an understanding, while seemingly unquestionable, generates an image of endless “little men” in “little men”, where each successive one reproduces in oneself what was presented in one’s predecessor’s mind.

Yet this is true not only in Rubinstein’s works... In the phrase “it is not thinking that thinks, it is the person who thinks”, we also indirectly, sometimes namelessly, use the idea of the “subject” of the inner life, i.e. the one who thinks, perceives, experiences, who reflects all these things internally. The risk of falling into the abyss of bad infinity is obvious (Fig. 1).

How to overcome, how to curb “at the start” bad infinity? How can we prevent appearing a dull series of little men in little men? Isn’t it better not to aspire to visibility at all, accepting the fact that our intention to represent the I in any way is fundamentally utopian? Should we agree that I is crucially invisible, “not visualisable”, that it — the I — is visible, invisible? Let us imagine one artist’s nude self-portrait; we see nothing in front of us, only the artist’s signature and his painting’s title (Fig. 2).

But wouldn’t it be absurd to try to visualize the invisible? The author of these words (not the author of the drawing!) thinks so: yes, it is absurd!

Here is another solution. The I is treated as a psychophysical whole among its four attributes.

• The Existential I (“the I in feeling”, “I-feeling”, “The Oceanic I”).
• The Presuming I (“The I in action”, “I-striving”, “I-will”, “The Intentional I”).
• The Self-valuable I (“The Authentic I”, “The I in experience”, “The I for myself”).

Fig. 1. Naïve picture of I. Sometimes three images are combined, which doesn’t save the theorist from “falling” into “bad infinity” (Petrovsky [10])
As we shall see, a special role in forming the I’s four attributes (hypostases) is played by activity, which combines complex activity manifestations.

The Existential I is represented by multiple sensations, or, more accurately, by a co-sentiment of sensations: feelings [19], “sensuous fabric”, “amodal sensations” [5]. It is a fabric of subjectivity, the “matter of the I” (“material cause”, according to Aristotle). In psychoanalysis the Existential I corresponds in part to the “oceanic feeling” noted by R. Rolland and featured in Sigmund Freud’s letters to the writer [23].

The activity involved in the Existential I emergence is represented by the individual’s activity transforming the “irritability” of the body into sensation as such (orientational-seeking activity in the cultural-activity paradigm). The idea of co-senses as a “matter” of the I is, to some extent, a reincarnation of David Hume’s [22] and Ernst Mach’s [8] well-known views on the nature of the I.

The Phenomenal I. It is the image of the individual as a bodily being combined with images of other elements of the environment, which forms an overall structured phenomenal field (“territory of the I”, James [1]). The foregoing is represented as a configuration of impressions, perceptions, fantasies and can be schematized as “little men” and symbols of their presence in each other as well as “things”, existing and reflected. Additionally, the territory of the I includes trajectories of connection between elements, visual-audio paths, they conjugate images of people and things; we call them “tracks” (Fig. 3).

All this, in the process of development of the I, the individual will consider “his”, saying “It is mine” [1]. This scheme relates our understanding of the Phenomenal I to the constructions of V.A. Lefebvre [6; 7], the creator of “little men” who have been living in the expanse of G.P. Shchedrovitsky’s and his followers’ [21] organizational-activity games for more than half a century.

This view of the I significantly corrects the conventional notions, differing from them in principle. As part of the phenomenal field, the “drawn” I itself does not “perceive” anything, does not act “out of itself”, and is not ready to “experience” anything. To illustrate this, there is a fragment of the phenomenal field sketched by Ernst Mach [8] (Fig. 4).

One may ask: “Who, though, sees the subjective contents-creations of the psyche?” — I answer: “Nobody”. The art gallery is empty. There are no viewers there. There is no artist. His self-portrait is present. But it is also a painting, one of those in the gallery [9]. None of the elements of the phenomenal field, none of their combinations contain activity, are not endowed with secret “psychic energy”, “psychic causality”, according to V.V. Zhenkovsky, which has been and is still being written about by many people without even a slightest thought about

![Fig. 2. “Another solution?”](application for placement under consideration)
consequences — it was once criticized by Gustav Speth (in his critical works he strongly emphasized the “non-energetic character” of I [20]).

The Phenomenal I is the result of assimilative (reflective) activity that “absorbs” the socio-cultural life realities: people’s behavior, the movement of things, communication acts, signs and their handling, the image of the individual’s own mobile physical body — all that forms the “territory of the I”. An integral “image of the world” is formed in the context of associative activity [5], synthesizing diverse elements of the phenomenal field, imaginary “I see”, “I experience”, “I act”, some “imprint” of the world (society, culture, things) in the material of the individual’s “feelings” (a pattern of co-sensations).

Our thesis, then, is that the Phenomenal I, as a pattern of co-sensations, mediates the individual’s interaction with his environment. What is meant is that combinations of structured phenomenal field’s elements are capable of guiding behavior, configuring an individual’s contacts with the world. Such an I is a model of a possible future, a “formal cause”, according to Aristotle.

The Presuming I manifests itself in action. In characterizing this mode of the I, we introduce the notion of subjectless activity [14], which means the dynamic material of becoming activity. Once upon a time Immanuel Kant left a short and rather elegant definition of activity — “causality of cause” — “for use” by grateful posterity. Thus the Purpose was not written in the definition of activity. Subjectless activity, as a “part” of activity, is not characterized by purposiveness.

We accept three assumptions:

1) human individual’s activity is not always purposive, i.e. it can be, in particular, subjectless;

2) encountering the “picture” (where the “subject”, with its “inner world” and other elements of the structured phenomenal field, is already “drawn”), activity becomes oriented (Fig. 5)⁴.

3) Purposive processes are conditioned by a mismatch between the Phenomenal I’s structures mediating the activity and the new structures corresponding to the produced activity results. The dissonance possible in this case generates an impulse to overcome the discrepancy, and in this way the I converts into the acting cause (in Aristotle’s terms) of subsequent acts. The needed future model appears in the phenomenal field (we use N.A. Bernstein’s well-known term in the new context). It stimulates and directs activity. Thus, the mirage of a spring in a desert does not quench thirst in itself, but it induces and directs the traveler’s behavior —sometimes towards the spring, sometimes past it.

The Self-valuable (Authentic) I means the experience of the fullness of one’s own subjectivity. When the desired and produced effects of activity coincide, a sense of consonance is born, experienced as pleasure, be

---

⁴ Whereas in E.V. Ilyenkov’s famous interpretation of the ideal [3], activity assimilates the form of a thing existing externally, giving it a second life (“being a thing outside a thing”), in our case the ideal comes from I, a pattern of co-phenomena in the inner world.
it pleasure of rest (according to S. Freud), or excitement (in heterostasis concepts). Pleasure here is the ultimate cause (according to Aristotle) of supra-adaptive activity [16] (the self-renewing “activity of experience” [15]). In E.B. Starovoitennko’s terms [18], we could say about acquiring and reproducing a higher state of “self-identity of the I,” “clarity of the I”. Developing the metaphor of a traveler going to a mirage, we can state that in this case the miracle of the spring turns into a thirst-quenching spring itself. For more details see our articles [10; 11; 12; 13; 14; 15; 16].

As a result, the I appears as a wholeness — causa sui (“cause of self”), uniting in itself four causes (according to Aristotle) — material (“from what”), formal (“on the form of what”), acting (“because of what”) and final (“for what”).

In conclusion, please allow me to synthesize the possible status of the I in cultural-activity discourse. I think that the category of the I is a unique condition for viable integration of ideas developed at different times in history by creators of diverse philosophical and psychological systems — ideas of D. Hume (“the I is a knot or a complex of current perceptions), B. Spinoza (causa sui, “reasons of the self”), J. Fichte (“I am”), E. Mach (the I as a stable perceptual complex), L.S. Vygotsky (the I imbued with psychological systems and the instrumental function of signs), V.A. Lefebvre (with his “little men” and the algebra of reflexion), M.K. Mamardashvili...

One episode comes to my mind. I was lucky to be in Alexei Nikolaevich Leontiev’s office at that dramatic hour. During my presence there was a telephone conversation, and the event in question was sad — Merab Konstantinovich was dismissed as editor-in-chief of “Voprosy Filosofii” [Questions of Philosophy]. Leontiev has never heard of it before. What happened? Apparently, one of the great Soviet philosophers, the powers that be, had publicly called E.V. Ilyenkov a “machist” (in those days this sounded like a sentence); and then Mamardashvili, in a sonorous, artistic whisper, across the room, uttered: “It is better to be a machist than a fool”. I remember with what pleasure Leontiev quoted these words of Merab Konstantinovich at that time, squinting his eyes and laughing acerbically.

Let me conclude. There are many works devoted to the I as a special mysterious entity. Their authors consider the I by analogy with the objects of natural scientific cognition that exist “beyond” the researcher (stars, birds, volcanoes, etc.). Meanwhile, the I is “not quite” an object, but rather a “construct” that we form and which resuscitates each time we address it as the source, the goal, the means and the result of the activity carried out.

References

Н.Р. Анашкин’s forthcoming master’s thesis (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Department of Psychology, 2023) develops the idea of happiness as transcendence of pleasure; happiness is self-valuable and contains the prospect of being experienced again and again. Acknowledging this, we must agree that happiness as a value is always a “for-no-point”, and that the expression “short-lived happiness” is an oxymoron.
of knowledge, will, experiences]. *Metodologiya i istoriya psikhologii* [Methodology and history of psychology], 2010a. Issue 1, pp. 136—148. (In Russ.).


12. Петровский В.А. Я в мысли, и я навсегда: как возможно сущестовование Я? [I am in thought, and I am in reality: how is the existence of I possible?]. Moscow: Alfa-M, 2012, pp. 195—222 (In Russ.).


17. Рубинштейн С.Л. Основы общей психологии. СПб.: Питер, 2019. 505 с.


