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REVIEWS
РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Review on the book "Vygotsky's Life Work"[1]

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Рецензия на книгу «Дело Выготского»[2]

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Monographs on the work of L.S. Vygotsky are published in Russian infrequently — many times less often than in foreign languages. And those that do exist, including foreign ones, can hardly compare with the book by E.Yu. Zavershneva in terms of the level and depth of research.

Nine years ago, in 2017, the "Notebooks of L.S. Vygotsky", prepared by Zavershneva and R. van der Veer, were published. Finally, his works were published in his homeland as they deserve: without omissions, without ideological or stylistic editing of the text, without the barbaric replacement of terms to bring them in line with "modern standards", and with detailed commentary (it should be noted that in the Russian edition they are noticeably more extensive and more interesting than in the English edition published by Springer a year later).

Thanks to the "Notebooks", the reader gained direct access to Vygotsky's home laboratory and can now trace the development of his thought from gymnasium notebooks to his farewell note: "Further — silence".

Since then, however, few have taken advantage of this opportunity. Vygotsky's views and the concepts of his "historical psychology" are often discussed without taking into account their genesis and the dynamics of their development, without due attention to shifts in the evolving theory. One turn was so sharp and radical that it confused even his loyal associates. A.N. Leontiev entered into "confrontation" with his teacher, insisting on a "return to the original theses" and on developing the

[1] Zavershneva E. Yu. Vygotsky's Life Work. Moscow: Kanon+, 2026. 528 p. ISBN 978-5-88373-884-4.
[2] Завершнева Е.Ю. Дело Выготского. М.: Канон+, 2026. 528 с. ISBN 978-5-88373-884-4.

problem of consciousness in the direction of "practice". Vygotsky was distressed, urged Leontiev "not to work all the time at the lower limits", and suggested that the time had come to build a "peak psychology"...

After Vygotsky's death, no one was found who was ready and able to continue the development of the new theory of consciousness. Partly for this reason, the discoveries of the "late" Vygotsky, tied to the concepts of lived emotional experience and affect, the "semantic field", and "free meaningful action", remained forgotten for a long time. Zavershneva's new book fills this gap and eliminates a number of blind spots in established readings of Vygotsky. It fully makes use of the material from his notebooks, as well as transcripts of lectures and reports from the 1930s that have only recently become available.

The reviewed book comprises 36 chapters. The introductory chapter describes the course of the "archival revolution", which Zavershneva herself initiated twenty years ago in the Vygotsky family archive; outlines, in general terms, the current state of research on his scientific legacy; contains an inventory of the works completed by the author to date; and, finally, reveals her personal attitude toward the "Vygotsky project".

The next two chapters show, on the one hand, the striking diversity of interpretations and evaluations of Vygotsky's legacy (often influenced by ideological preferences, as in the dismal era of Razmyslov and Rudneva); and, on the other hand, the principles of general scientific, "metapsychological", and specifically psychological levels that Vygotsky placed at the foundation of the cultural-historical theory of the development of higher psychological functions.

An attempt is made to clarify the concrete content of the principles of the unity of intellect and affect, communication and generalization, and others, which in contemporary literature have been worn down to clich s and ritual phrases. Zavershneva attributes to the "hard core" of the psychological principles of the cultural-historical theory "four consecutively introduced principles: (1) the social origin of higher mental functions, (2) sign mediation, (3) systemic structure, and (4) the semantic structure of consciousness; the latter is the dominant one. On this basis, a theory of dynamic semantic systems is constructed..." (p. 48).

Not limiting herself to historical-scientific inquiry, Zavershneva seeks "to test Vygotsky's project on some contemporary data" (p. 49). She also offers "elements of philosophical interpretation", inspired by readings of Wittgenstein, Lacan, and Heidegger.

Thus, the study is not reduced to historical-psychological excavations, and its author is not particularly attracted by the "strict, monastic regime of thought" that Vygotsky demanded from his students. At the same time, Zavershneva declares her intention "to read Vygotsky not only attentively but also literally" — which she largely succeeds in doing.

The next four chapters provide an outline of the development of the cultural-historical theory as a "research program". This term from Lakatos is not accidental — his concept of the history of science is used in the book as a working tool, including for the periodization of Vygotsky's work, which is presented as a series of "shifts" in the core of the theory. In each period, the cultural-historical theory is enriched by a new "core" principle, after which the entire structure undergoes a fundamental reconstruction.

Eight chapters discuss the problem of meaning as a structural unit of verbal thinking and of the "sign operation" in general. Here Zavershneva follows in the wake of "Thinking and Speech", where meaning is defined as the "inner side of the word". But not only words have meaning. Everything that enters the orbit of cultural activity — any object or process — acquires meaning. People find meaning even in the "indifferent radiance of the most distant stars" (Feuerbach).

According to Vygotsky, the word generalizes, abstracts from the immediate situation, and confers universality on the particular — that is, meaning. But action does the same work, and it begins earlier than the word — both in the history of humankind and in child development. Actions have always meant more than words and have determined the value of words. The true meaning of words is revealed and tested in action.

In "The Problem of Consciousness", Vygotsky notes that the stick used by K hler's ape, unlike cultural tools, lacks meaning — "there is no objective meaning" — and that "a tool requires abstraction". In humans, an operation with a stick is meaningful; the stick has meaning here, despite the fact that, unlike a word, it is a tool rather than a sign.

Tracing the evolution of Vygotsky's views on linguistic meanings, Zavershneva devotes separate chapters to transformations of meaning in the development of children's consciousness; to the experiments of L.S. Sakharov and Zh.I. Shif; and to pathological changes in word meanings in schizophrenia, when the word ceases to be a means of communication and generalization.

Of particular interest is the analysis of Vygotsky's clinical work, which has been scarcely covered in the scientific literature. Meanwhile, "the first attempts to introduce the principle of the semantic structure of consciousness can be found in notes of a clinical nature, namely in reflections on the nature of schizophrenia. And this is no coincidence, since schizophrenia is a disorder of the semantic sphere of personality, in which the system of connections between affect, thinking, and speech is destroyed; thus, in the phenomenon of schizophrenia we find the knot of three themes that will become central to the cultural-historical theory from 1932" (p. 81).

Vygotsky sees the causes of hysteria, schizophrenia, and aphasia in disturbances in the system of connections between thinking and will, emotions, and speech, respec-

tively. At the same time, he relies on the hypothesis of the unity of the laws of development and disintegration of higher mental functions, which appears already in his earliest scientific publications (p. 79).

Six chapters are devoted to the concept of the semantic field. The stages of its ontogenetic development under normal conditions are described rather briefly, while experimental studies of pathologies of the semantic field are examined in more detail, including the joint work of G.V. Birenbaum and B.V. Zeigarnik (which is assessed quite critically in the book, as are the concepts of meaning in A.R. Luria and A.N. Leontiev).

In light of the relationship between the cultural-historical theory and the "activity theory" that branched off from it, of particular interest is the detailed and profound discussion in the book of the concept of the "zigzag of free meaningful action" (a concept overlooked by researchers of Vygotsky's work, although it appears in the works of Birenbaum and Zeigarnik). This key concept captures the nature of volitional action and the development of the relationship between practical activity and thinking: (1) the "dynamics of the situation", situational action and thinking; (2) "the dynamic processes of thought itself in the semantic field"; (3) "action refracted through the prism of thought", which becomes meaningful and free (see the posthumously published work "The Problem of Mental Retardation").

"The very form of the zigzag — the departure from reality, the movement of thought, and its return to reality — is Hegelian, but taken in Lenin's transcription", Zavershneva rightly notes (p. 477). I would only add: unfortunately, it is not taken directly from Hegel. The image of the path of the World Spirit to freedom through the Golgotha of "alienation" — that is where the zigzag reaches a truly world-historical scale. Against this background, the "Leninist transcription" appears somewhat pale...

In the zigzag development of consciousness — through the departure of thought from action and of the word from reality, up to the "nonsense possible only in humans" (Vygotsky) — in this dialectical process there emerges the highest fusion of intellect and affect: the concept subordinates our desires and experiences to its power (will), making them rational and therefore free. Freedom arises in thought and is then transferred into action, says Vygotsky.

The timing of the appearance of these reflections in the notebooks coincides with the period of Vygotsky's dispute with Leontiev (who dates the "apogee of disagreements" to 1932 — early 1933). I would venture to suggest that the idea of the zigzag emerged as a product of this dispute about the relationship between consciousness and "object-oriented action," practice — as Vygotsky's response to the scientific challenge posed by Leontiev. Although in its explicit form the idea of the zigzag is articulated in the course of a critical discussion of Kurt Lewin's "dynamic theory", and in particular his interpretation of childhood intellectual disability.

Zavershneva provides an excellent analysis of two clinical cases described by Vygotsky on the reverse side of library cards. In patients Z. and K., with the same diagnosis (dementia caused by Pick's disease), different — ascending and descending — links of the zigzag of free action disintegrate. K. is unable to detach from reality, while Z. cannot return to it. In both cases, the connection between intellect and affect is also disrupted.

The final and largest section — 11 chapters — presents a collection of Zavershneva's reflections, written in a "Vygotskian" spirit, on various topics. These include dreams with their "raw affects" (two chapters), the anomaly of consciousness in the case of S.V. Shereshevsky, Vygotsky's "semic" method, P.Ya. Galperin's critique of Vygotsky's theory of consciousness, and a number of other complex issues.

In her study, Zavershneva adopts precisely the perspective that Vygotsky called "peak": to view the history of a subject from the height of the most mature form of its development, its "acme." Each step and turn in Vygotsky's intellectual biography is assessed from the highest point he achieved — within the framework of the theory of consciousness as a "dynamic semantic system". The coordinate axes X and Y in this system are intellect and affect, and its "units" are our lived emotional experiences. All the research carried out by Vygotsky and his collaborators represents nothing other than stages of ascent toward this theory, phases of its maturation.

Ahead, however, one can already discern the contours of a new, even higher "peak / acmeist psychology", destined to show people the "path to freedom" (phrases from Vygotsky's notebooks). It would teach us how to master affects through concepts: to comprehend, generalize, and logically connect our experiences into a "system with a single center", following the example of Spinoza. The purpose of this psychology is to form a "human being in the fullest sense of the word", if not a "superhuman".

Vygotsky did not manage to complete the remaining path to this Everest, and his students chose other peaks and paths. The promised land remained terra incognita. Yet there remains a chance, a hope, that future generations will pave the way there — for which it is necessary to clearly see the goal and be able to climb onto the "shoulders of a giant".

It is precisely this life's work of Vygotsky that Zavershneva's monograph, in my view, can and should serve. In no other "intellectual biography" of Vygotsky have I encountered such an acmeist perspective on his scientific life. And yet only in this way — looking from above downward — can one understand the process of development in any field. Let us recall Marx's famous aphorism about the anatomy of man and the anatomy of the ape, or its analogue in Vygotsky's words: "Shake-

speare's tragedy will explain to us the mysteries of primitive art".

This is not a book in which every phrase is weighed and every step of thought is strictly logical. Rather, before the reader unfolds a process of scientific search, and one can observe how "search-oriented activity" proceeds in the labyrinth of human consciousness. The author feels her way forward, overcomes obstacles, turns aside here and there, perhaps sometimes losing the path. And the reader, sweating, climbs after her from chapter to chapter.

Zavershneva pulls the specialist, bogged down in the routine of "normal science", out of this normality and immerses them in the stream of "romantic science". There, where schools of anomalous facts swim, where major and minor discoveries break paradigms, where errors can be more valuable than commonplace truths, and where the pulse of Vygotsky's thought — and that of other long-deceased giants of scientific psychology — still beats.

While reading Zavershneva's book, the author of these lines constantly felt the urge either to continue certain lines of thought or to enter into debate, diligently worked with a marker, and wrote travel notes for himself as a reader. In conclusion, I can only wish the new book a long and successful journey in the world of science and a prominent place on library shelves, which it undoubtedly deserves.

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