

## Problem of Mediating: L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev, D.N. Uznadze

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The subject of discussion in the presented article is the “immediacy postulate” and the task of overcoming it, specified in the methodological principle of mediating a two-term scheme of analysis. The options for solving the problem of mediation contained in the theoretical systems of L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev and D.N. Uznadze are considered and analysed. D.N. Uznadze, who was the first to designate this methodological discourse, and A.N. Leontiev represented its essence approximately the same way, namely, as a question of the relationship between internal (mental) and external (transpsychic), while, as a mediating link, they proposed, respectively, the set and activity. The question is posed differently in the cultural-historical theory, where mediation is the process of transforming “natural functions” into higher mental processes, in which the “sign” acts as a mediating agent. In any case, the problem of mediation appears to be fundamental. However, the question of a mediator between the psychic and non-psychic world is inseparable from the psychophysical problem, which makes it difficult to reach the real empirical level of analysis. In the light of some considerations by D.N. Uznadze and certain empirical data, an opinion is expressed about the possibility of limiting the area of action of the principle of mediation.

**Keywords:** immediacy postulate, principle of mediation, Vygotsky, Leontiev, Uznadze.

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## Проблема опосредования: Л.С. Выготский, А.Н. Леонтьев, Д.Н. Узнадзе

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В статье предметом обсуждения выступают «постулат непосредственности» и задача его преодоления, конкретизированная в методологическом принципе опосредования двучленной схемы анализа. Рассматриваются и анализируются варианты решения проблемы опосредования, содержащиеся в теоретических системах Л.С. Выготского, А.Н. Леонтьева и Д.Н. Узнадзе. Д.Н. Узнадзе, первым обозначивший этот методологический дискурс, и А.Н. Леонтьев примерно одинаково представляли его сущность как вопрос о соотношении внутреннего (психического) и внешнего (транспсихического), при этом в качестве опосредующего их звена предлагали, соответственно, установку и деятельность. Иначе ставится вопрос в культурно-исторической теории, где опосредование есть процесс превращения «натуральных функций» в высшие психические процессы, в котором опосредующим агентом выступает «знак». В любом случае проблема опосредования предстает как основополагающая. Однако вопрос о медиаторе между психическим и непсихическим миром неотделим от психофизической проблемы, что затрудняет выход на реальный эмпирический уровень анализа. В свете некоторых соображений Д.Н. Узнадзе и определенных эмпирических данных высказывается мнение о возможности ограничения ареала действия принципа опосредования.

**Ключевые слова:** постулат непосредственности, принцип опосредования, Выготский, Леонтьев, Узнадзе.

The concept of “immediacy postulate”, as a methodological principle and the main (“fatal”) mistake of all previous psychology, was brought into the methodological body of D.N. Uznadze’s psychological system. Its meaning “consists in the fact that objective reality directly and immediately affects the conscious psyche and in this direct connection determines its activity” [18; p. 158]. For quite a long time, the task of overcoming the immediacy postulate remained a central problem for only the Georgian school of psychology. Even Soviet colleagues paid little attention to this principle. The situation changed markedly after the publication of A.N. Leontiev’s epoch-making book: “Activity. Consciousness. Personality”, which thoroughly discusses the issue of the need to develop a theory in the direction of identifying a mediating link between external influences and the internal states of the subject [15]. This call of the country’s most authoritative psychologist was received with great interest and enthusiasm by the Georgian colleagues, because it opened a direct path to a dialogue between the two leading scientific schools of the Soviet psychology. This and the subsequent brilliant research done by A.G. Asmolov [1] gave impetus to a very long, intellectually and personally loaded discussion, about which the remaining participants still remember with pleasure [13]. The problems associated with the immediacy postulate soon became the focus of attention. The task of overcoming this postulate was designated by A.G. Asmolov as “Uznadze’s task” and the research itself was most highly appreciated. “Perhaps some other ideas of D.N. Uznadze will undergo revision, for this is the normal fate of all living theories, but the analysis of immediacy postulate and its fatal consequences for psychology, the idea of mediating the two-term scheme of analysis through the “subpsychic”, which crowns this analysis, will remain an enduring value of psychological science, its fundamental idea” [1, p. 17]. Along with the increasing interest in the work of L.S. Vygotsky, allegations appeared that D.N. Uznadze, L.S. Vygotsky and A.N. Leontiev, in their theoretical systems tried to solve this essentially identical methodological problem, but in different ways.

We are talking about the fundamental issue of determining the methodological status of the most popular concepts and assessing the degree of their relationship. And this is very important, at least from the point of view of the history of science. The fruitfulness of such a study primarily depends on an accurate and unambiguous understanding of the meaning of the “Uznadze task”. Curiously, two researchers, A.G. Asmolov and M.G. Yaroshevsky,

trying to compare methodological foundations of the systems of D.N. Uznadze and L.S. Vygotsky in the light of their solution of the issue of mediation, interpret it differently and come to different conclusions. M.G. Yaroshevsky believes that L.S. Vygotsky tends to “sign” mediation, A.G. Asmolov – to the activity one.

At the same time, it is alleged that L.S. Vygotsky and D.N. Uznadze “destroyed the immediacy postulate, overcoming both the positivist interpretation of scientific knowledge and the principle of the “closed causal series” [24, p. 286]. At the same time, it is noted that these authors set and solved the problem of mediation both in terms of methodology (philosophy), and in terms of science (empirical). In philosophical and ontological terms, the denial of the immediacy postulate prompted both scientists to abandon the identification of psyche and consciousness and turn to the study of “the unconscious as a dimension of the human (rather than animal) psyche and as a psychological (rather than purely physiological) regulator of behavior” [24, p. 297]. This assessment needs serious clarification. L.S. Vygotsky certainly did not have time to “turn to the study of the unconscious”. In his works “there are only isolated and not very clear indications of how the unconscious should be understood <...> they are clearly not enough to develop the theory of the unconscious from the point of view of cultural-historical psychology” [8, p. 102]. The nature and functions of the unconscious psyche remain undiscovered [14], so the task of mediation could not lead to it.

As for D.N. Uznadze, the set has always been conceived as a universal mechanism for mediating the mental activity of any dimension, both human and animal. The set, at the very final stage of the development of the conception, was characterized as an unconscious-psychic phenomenon. All the rest of the time D.N. Uznadze identified the psyche and consciousness and rejected the existence of unconscious psyche. Dimitry Nikolaevich began to develop his own system much earlier when he clearly understood all the difficulties associated with the immediacy principle. However, the content and name of the corresponding postulate were formed much later. Consequently, the rejection of this postulate itself did not lead D.N. Uznadze to the idea of the unconscious psyche; instead, it led to the idea of the “biosphere”. This is the idea of a philosophical-ontological level in the spirit of “ontological pluralism”, meaning the postulation of some “still unknown” reality in which the opposition of subject and object is removed, and thereby mediating their relationship [20].

Significantly, from the very beginning, the formulation of the question of the immediacy postulate is closely linked with the *psychophysical problem*, without the solution of which, according to the author, it is impossible to construct a psychological theory. “Uznadze’s task” is to find a link that is a mediator between the environment and mental life. This can be expressed through a three-term system of analysis: environment—subject (set)—behavior (activity). However, the immediacy postulate means not only the connection between the external and the internal (mental), but also the connection between the phenomena of the mental world themselves. In the optics of the psychophysical problem, the first option is linked with the theory of interaction, the second — with the theory of parallelism. However, “the idea of the direct nature of the connection between these phenomena in both theories is a dogmatically accepted postulate” [18, p. 161].

Later, the “biosphere” was replaced by the term “set”, which marked the emphasis on the scientific and empirical level of analysis. But methodologically its content remained the same for almost two decades. Speaking about the setting in the generalizing work of the early forties, in which the immediacy postulate was first clearly formulated, D.N. Uznadze characterizes it as “a specific, peculiar reality that precedes the particular — mental and physiological — and is not reduced to them” [21, p. 191].

According to L.S. Vygotsky, the place of the mediating factor is given to the sign [6; 7]. If we imagine the failed dialogue between them, then D.N. Uznadze probably would have asked, if a sign wasn’t an objective, external? It turns out that the external is mediated by the external?! To this L.S. Vygotsky would probably answer that this is an external of a different kind, not natural, but historical, social. Accordingly, the psyche is twofold — natural and transformed on sign basis (the so-called “higher mental functions”). “Natural” (primary) mental functions by their nature are *direct and involuntary*, being directly determined by biological and environmental factors. D.N. Uznadze, obviously, would not have accepted such a formulation of the question since he was looking for a universal mechanism of mediation that would work at all levels of mental life. At the highest levels of human psyche, the mechanism of objectification is added to the set mechanism, introducing social content into it, including sign content. However, the primary nature of the mediating principle (mechanism) remains the same, “biospheric”, it continues to be the “principle of life”. Although natural mental processes are involuntary, the behavior tailored from them also needs to be mediated, like any experience.

One can probably wonder if L.S. Vygotsky ever set the task of overcoming the “immediacy postulate” in the sense that it is formulated by D.N. Uznadze. The latter is always the question of the relationship between subject and object<sup>1</sup>. And mediation in the cultural-historical theory, in essence, is a question of formation of higher mental functions. Being mediated socially, as well as by the sign, natural functions acquire an arbitrary character — and this is a completely different topic, the topic of the genesis of mental functions and their transition from one form of regulation to another [6]. This is first. Secondly, the author of the theory of set considers the problem of mediation in relation to the whole mental life, and not only with *mental processes* or even *consciousness* in general. From the very beginning, this methodological question was asked in relation to any kind of mental activity, including animal behavior and involuntary, impulsive forms of human behavior (except for reflex forms of response). Proceeding from this, one should not equate *mediation and arbitrariness*, and this is exactly what V.P. Zinchenko does [9]. To rehabilitate immediacy, expressed in the form of spontaneity of acts of creativity, intuition, direct discretion, etc., the author doubts the universality of the *postulate of mediation*, which, according to him, was actually approved by D.N. Uznadze and A.N. Leontiev. In his opinion, this methodological principle is also supported by the fact that cultural-historical psychology in the version of L.S. Vygotsky is based on the idea of meditation. The later shows, that the main guideline for V.P. Zinchenko, at least regarding the problem of mediation, is not the theory of activity, and even more so the theory of set, but a cultural-historical conception. And this is generally understandable, since his own analysis is based mainly on the characteristics of the flow and genesis of mental processes and phenomena of consciousness. This is where the fundamental discrepancy between the interpretations of the problem by D.N. Uznadze and V.P. Zinchenko is revealed. D.N. Uznadze seeks to understand what the true nature of the impact of the external world on the psyche and behavior is, as well as the impact on each other of the phenomena of consciousness. For V.P. Zinchenko, the question of immediacy or mediation is the question of how certain mental processes are manifested, in what phenomenological form, and how they are formed. Therefore, he constantly slips into the optics of arbitrariness — non-arbitrariness, although he specifically notes that the mediated and immediate only partially coincide with arbitrariness and non-arbitrariness. In general: for D.N. Uznadze — the whole psyche and activity are central issues, for V.P. Zinchenko — a mental process.

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<sup>1</sup> Here you can find similarities with the subject-activity approach, especially with the ideas of A.V. Brushlinsky about the problem of mediation [5].

D.N. Uznadze — through the biospheric reality to the integral subject of behavior, V.P. Zinchenko — to cultural-sign mediation. So, V.P. Zinchenko is focused on the cultural and historical concept of L.S. Vygotsky, and not on A.N. Leontiev's version of the theory of activity, which, despite the "common genotype", nevertheless, are quite different and independent theoretical systems<sup>2</sup>.

According to V.P. Zinchenko, "the mediation of the psyche in the most general sense means the inclusion of all mental acts (processes, functions, functional organs — neoplasms, personal constructs, etc.) in the cultural context of the life and activity of the individual" [9, p. 6]. If this means that activity is simply made up of various functions, then the sense of the very concept of mediation is lost. It presupposes the existence of something that is between two phenomena serving as a mediator of their connection. The difference between the mediated and the immediate is also lost, because the direct activity also includes various functions — it cannot be empty! It is also not clear what means (what kind of mediation) are tools, signs, etc.? "In a narrower sense, the author writes, mediation points to the fact that all mental acts mediate each other. Each of them is influenced by others, so the selection of any one of them in any pure form is an almost insoluble problem for experimental psychology" [ibid.]. Yes, undoubtedly, the mutual influence and interpenetration of mental processes is a very important psychological fact, but what does mediation have to do with it? And how to distinguish the mediated from the immediate, when mutual influence seems to take place always and everywhere. In general, it can be stated that despite many interesting considerations, this study of the venerable scientist does not achieve its goal, since the refutation of the mediation principle is based mainly on its not entirely correct interpretation. Nevertheless, we are ready to support the very desire of the author to oppose the hypertrophy of the ideology of mediation, but on other grounds, which will be discussed at the end.

Since we are talking about misunderstanding of the issue, we have to recall the already mentioned study by M.G. Yaroshevsky, who tried to build bridges between the cultural-historical concept and the theory of set on the basis of the principle of mediation implemented in them. Arguing about the common roots of these psychological systems, the author concludes that D.N. Uznadze and L.S. Vygotsky, developing an alternative to the immediacy postulate, "found it in the philosophy of dialectical

materialism. This philosophy became a compass for them in search of a new psychology" [24, p. 91]. For L.S. Vygotsky it may be so, but in relation to D.N. Uznadze, this statement is definitely not true. What kind of "diamat" is this, if he initially builds his psychology on a new "still unknown" ontology, on a "psychophysically neutral" "subpsychic" reality that terrifies any orthodox Marxist-Leninist. And the set, which is characterized as a specific and peculiar reality that is fundamentally different from particular mental and physiological processes, hardly harmonizes with the foundations of "diamat"<sup>3</sup>.

At A.N. Leontiev's school, the problem of mediation found a systematic and profound development in the works of A.G. Asmolov. He refers the theories of L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev and D.N. Uznadze to the so-called "non-classical psychology", while believing that "the fundamental novelty of these various areas of methodology lies in the breakthrough beyond the boundaries of the immediacy postulate and the search for the mediating link, which, generating mental phenomena, does not itself belong to the sphere of the mental" [2; p. 446]. At the same time, in the context of the distinction between classical and non-classical psychology, he speaks of a single direction of Vygotsky-Leontiev. The same can be found with E.E. Sokolova [17]. "D.N. Uznadze and the leading representatives of the theory of activity <...> solved a common problem — the problem of overcoming the immediacy postulate and the two-term scheme of analysis of mental processes that follows from it: the impact of an object — a change in the current states of the subject. In one case, as the middle link — the substance that generates mental phenomena — the "subpsychic" i.e., the primary set is proposed; in the other case such link is objective activity. The generality of the task, as well as the attributes of the mediating substance, give the right to compare these options for solving it. In case if the concept of a primary set is endowed with the features of a mediating substance, it is alternative to the category of activity, i.e. D.N. Uznadze and A.N. Leontiev offer directly opposite options for solving the problem of overcoming the immediacy postulate [1, p. 24].

Based mainly on the early works of D.N. Uznadze, A.G. Asmolov formulates the requirements for the mediating instance: it should not be either an exclusively physical or mental phenomenon; it must be a transformer, a "translator" of events in the external world into psychic phenomena and conditioning them; it

<sup>2</sup> This question, of course, is entirely an "internal affair" of those who study these theoretical systems in detail. We only note that in the Georgian psychological school, the opinion has always prevailed that the difference between them is quite clearly indicated in their names.

<sup>3</sup> Without going into the appropriate argumentation, we will refer to the opinion of a historian of psychology who specifically dealt with this issue: "the history of the psychology of set <...> allows you to get around the topic of Marxism in a completely natural way: both in its origin <...> and in content, this trend which arose and developed for quite a long time irrespective of Marxism, was in relative independence from Marxism" [3, p. 133].

must be integral, not decomposable into elements; only through it should the subjective mental phenomena, be influenced as well as the reverse impact of the mental on the physiological be carried out; this “substance” is a necessary condition for maintaining the vital activity of the individual, the “principle of life”; it must always precede and determine the conscious psyche that develops on its basis [1].

Since the concepts of primary set and activity are considered alternative from the point of view of the problem of mediation, it is obviously assumed that these features are attributed to an activity that, according to A.N. Leontiev, is conceived as the desired mediator. In this context, the following thesis becomes most important: “in order to study the world of mental phenomena, one must go beyond their limits and find such a unit of mental analysis that would not itself belong to the sphere of the mental” [2, p. 395]. Therefore, as an activity is considered to be such a unit and the one acting as a mediating link, then *it should not belong to the circle of mental phenomena*.

And here the questions that have become the subject of discussion in the course of the noted discussion arise. More than once the idea has been expressed that activity cannot serve as a mediating link, essentially for the same reason as a mental set. The fact is that activity, as a phenomenon, does not exist without and outside the internal, mental principle and content. According to A.N. Leontiev, “activity is the substance of consciousness” [15, p. 157], i.e. psyche and activity are ontologically identical, psyche is inseparable from activity being its essential, inalienable property [17]. But activity, filled with internal content, activity, as a manifestation of mental life, naturally, is not suitable for the role of an intermediary between internal and external, subjective and objective. Considering this obvious circumstance, the opinion is expressed that the category of activity, considered from the perspective of overcoming the immediacy postulate, acts as an explanatory principle, and not as a real phenomenon. In this case, it appears as a “substance” that has neither physical nor mental characteristics [2]. However, such a methodological move does not really explain anything. Whatever the status of an activity, an explanatory principle or a real phenomenon, it will not be able to play the role of a mediating instance, since it is completely saturated with mental content (unless, of course, it is understood in a behavioristic sense). The phenomenon/concept considered from the point of view of the explanatory principle should not lose its attributive feature, otherwise we will get another concept. Such a feature for activity is, of course, *mentality*.

The keynote of the noted discussion between representatives of the schools of A.N. Leontiev and D.N. Uznadze was a question about the primacy of activ-

ity or set. Since there is no subjectless activity, and the set in the understanding of the school of D.N. Uznadze, is a state of the subject, then the question of primacy acquires the features of a chicken and egg dilemma. Therefore, in principle, it is possible to formulate the following proposition – to see the mediating instance in the set is the same as in the activity and vice versa. However, at the same time, it will be necessary to “cleanse” both of them from the “mental admixture”, which definitely does not seem heuristic. In general, it should be noted that what has been said about the “mediating potential” of the concept of activity also applies to the set, understood as a mental phenomenon. In his latest works D.N. Uznadze qualified the set in this way, thereby creating an aporia that could not go unnoticed [4; 12; 16]. The set, being a purely mental formation, cannot serve as a mediating agent between the mental and physical worlds. This does not apply to the biosphere, which is comprehended as a prepsychic and “subpsychic area” that determines the psyche and main feature of which is the absence of a subject-object opposition.

At the second stage of the development of the theory of D.N. Uznadze, the scientist- empiricist comes to the fore. A methodology has been developed and a comprehensive study of the phenomenon, marked as the set, and not as the biosphere, has begun. If the latter was presented mainly as a certain methodological abstraction (principle), the set had a very real content, because it concerned the *state of the subject*. At the beginning the set was not understood as an unambiguously mental phenomenon, but rather a *psychophysiological* one. Accordingly, the principle of immediacy is interpreted as follows: “if our motor or mental processes represent a direct response to the stimuli acting on them, then it turns out that the relationship with reality is established not by the subject, but by his psyche, or, in particular, by his motor skills, that our behavior or experience arise without significant participation of the subject and, therefore, are uniquely determined by the stimuli acting on them” [21, p. 187]. This is how the principle of *subjective mediation* and the *integral subject* appeared as the initial category of the new psychology. However, this already comes into conflict with the original formulation of the question of mediation, because it lies in the fact that the objective (external) cannot directly affect the subjective (internal). And no matter how hard we try to distinguish the *subjective* from the *subjectivity*, the attitudinal state of the integral-subjective dimension, from the ordinary mental phenomena of the subjective world, both of them remain the property of the inner world, which is influenced by the external world, and therefore, we remain captive to the immediacy postulate. D.N. Uznadze, of course, made great efforts in order not to fall into the “fatal” methodological trap set by himself. Arguing

about the nature of the attitude, he tried in every way to highlight the absolute peculiarity of the set as a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the known phenomena of mental life. However, in fact, all attempts to fill essentially subjective phenomenon (i.e. set) with objective content, do not reach the goal. In the latest version of the theory, the concept of a *mental set* already clearly comes into conflict with the principle of mediation, which is the methodological basis of this conceptual system.

So, what options for solving the problem of mediation are offered in the theories of L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev and D.N. Uznadze and how do they relate to each other? Solving this problem, L.S. Vygotsky moved in the opposite direction from D.N. Uznadze, trying to find the unity of the external and internal (mental) in the phenomenon of the essentially external world, namely – in the sign. If we do not go beyond the binary ontology (external-internal) and recognize the legitimacy of the task of D.N. Uznadze, in fact, one of two options is left – either to attribute the function of the mediating link to *objectified subjectivity* (i.e., to the set – Uznadze's path), or to *subjectivized objectivity* (i.e., to the sign – Vygotsky's path).

L.S. Vygotsky and A.N. Leontiev, in general, also solved the problem of mediating the two-term scheme environment-psyche (behavior) in different ways. L.S. Vygotsky placed a mediating link in the first element of the two-term scheme (sign, culture as a whole), A.N. Leontiev – in the second (activity). Obviously, none of these assumptions, in essence, can be considered as overcoming the immediacy postulate, like the statement about the unambiguous mentality of the set, expressed in the last works by D.N. Uznadze. Of all the considered options for solving “Uznadze's task” (set, sign, activity and biospheric mediation), oddly enough, the last one seems to be logically the most consistent. But this is just the case when we have us not an object of the study before, but an “explanatory principle”, a philosophical and methodological category (hypothesis), which leads into the impenetrable jungle of an “eternal” *psychophysical problem*. It is difficult to imagine a real psychology built on this hypothetical notion. Of course, one can try to turn to the old Eastern ideas, in which the objective and the subjective seem to merge and have certain empirical references in the corresponding psychopractices. In an effort to “update” this idea, one can also look towards new “quantum concepts”. But one should not particularly hope for the possibility of operationalizing the hypothesis of a psychophysically neutral reality as the basis of mental life, which would be amenable to empirical research. Realizing this, even D.N. Uznadze rejected such a hypothesis.

As posing the question of overcoming, the immediacy postulate necessarily leads to a psychophysical problem

and even implies its solution (from the standpoint of a pluralistic ontology), then, if we turn away from this methodological principle, in any case, we will find ourselves in a dead end. Against this background, doubts naturally arise as to the expediency of raising the task of overcoming this postulate to the rank of a *fundamental methodological principle*. If we do not put the question too radically, then at least we should think about the *universality of the principle of mediation*.

It is noteworthy that the author of the term and the concept of “the immediacy postulate” himself thought about this. In a copybook for notes, where D.N. Uznadze recorded his hypothetical considerations, there is an entry made in 1945 with the following title: “The framework for the legitimacy of the immediacy postulate”. It says: “it should not be assumed that, under the influence of the environment, nothing ever arises in the subject outside his mediation, that everything is necessarily mediated by the *subject's set*. It seems that in the absence of a need or the possibility of establishing relations with the environment, the latter may still act on him, causing a direct effect in his psyche, body, somatics. This effect can be called a reflex or *reflexoid effect*. These will be the following: sensations – in the cognitive sphere, pleasure-displeasure – in the emotional sphere, and reflexes – in the motor sphere” [22, p. 261]. Perhaps the old psychology was not so wrong, the author continues, arguing that sensations, feelings (pleasure-displeasure) and reflexes are elementary content of our psyche and behavior. This entry clearly indicates the desire of D.N. Uznadze to limit, in some way, the area of action of the principle of mediation, admitting the existence of elementary forms of experiences and activity that arise as a result of direct stimulation emanating from the body or environment. However, the whole question is how far one can go along this path without destroying the fundamental principle of set based mediation. And how to justify where it works and where it doesn't, and why? For example, how legitimate is it to speak of activity, sign, or set based mediation in cases where a certain area of the brain is directly stimulated, resulting in an emotional *experience* (J. Olds) or inhibition of *behavior* (H. Delgado). In both cases, there is an external influence and a broadly understood psychic response, but neither set nor the activity of the subject are visible between them, which, according to the relevant theories, must necessarily mediate this connection. A psychic fact, seemingly, without any mediation, directly arises from a neurophysiological substrate, and there are plenty of such facts.

Here we, perhaps, will follow V.P. Zinchenko, who completed his research with the following words: “I think that it is too early to sum up the reflections on the relationship between the immediate and the mediated. It is better to put an ellipsis...” [9, p. 10].

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