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Introduction to symposium on Vygotsky and Spinoza

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It has been known since the publication of \textit{Thought and Language} in English that at the end of his life, Vygotsky turned to the ideas of Spinoza to overcome what he considered the shortcomings of his earlier theoretical ideas, bringing emotion to center stage in the process of development. Recent scholarship has made it clear that Spinoza was important from the beginning Vygotsky’s career. His doctoral thesis, \textit{The Psychology of Art}, opens with a quotation from Spinoza, and years later Leont’ev (1997) made it clear in his introduction to Vygotsky’s collected works that Vygotsky’s interest in the philosophy of Spinoza began as early as his student years, and “would remain his favorite thinker for the rest of his life” (p. 12).

Spinoza’s lifelong influence on Vygotsky, however, has remained a relatively unexplored issue. Only in the past decade or so has there been growing interest in the connections between the ideas of these two thinkers separated in time and cultural-historical circumstances. One reason for this trend may be that, after 40 years and a growing number of previously unpublished manuscripts coming to light, Western scholarship has now had the time to wrestle with Vygotsky’s ideas long enough to come up with some of the same needs and questions that brought him to Spinoza. Or perhaps the current historical zeitgeist has brought academicians back to the relation between the psychological categories “cognition” and “emotion,” the contemporary psychology’s versions of the philosophical categories of “intelligence” and “will” that were at the heart of Spinoza’s monism. For those within the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) tradition, the coincidence of an interest in Spinoza and a growing interest on the concept of \textit{perezhivanie} (Cole & Gajdamschko, 2016) is salient because different interpretations of the importance of this concept in the project of building a cultural-historical psychology became part of a growing divergence between Vygotsky and Leontiev.

One of the challenges of considering Vygotsky and Spinoza together is that most contemporary developmental psychologists and educators have neither encountered Spinoza’s ideas (they are working from secondary sources) nor agree on how, precisely, one should interpret Vygotsky. Hence a comparison of the two is the comparison of two, variously interpreted, systems of thought.

Some scholars have defended the idea that Spinoza’s influence is crucial for understanding Vygotsky’s system of thought (Gredler & Shields, 2004; Roth & Jornet, 2016, 2017; Van der Veer, 1984), whereas others have doubted the extent to which Spinoza’s philosophy penetrated into Vygotsky’s pen beyond his admiration and recognition for the Dutch philosopher (Glassman & Wang, 2004). All interpretations of the Spinoza–Vygotsky relationship, however, agree on the importance of the question of the \textit{unity of intellect and will} \textsuperscript{1} (Derry, 2004), or the \textit{problem of freedom}, which Vygotsky came to understand as “the central problem of all psychology” (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 210).

For Vygotsky, the solution to this problem lay in the solution of the “psychophysical relationship,” or what we today refer to as the mind–body problem. This issue, which had plagued all previous theories in psychology, was particularly salient in the psychology of emotions, where diverse answers to the problem of how physiological states (body) relate to psychological states (mind) were given. Concerned as he was with developing a \textit{materialist psychology}, solving this issue became a growing concern.
When Vygotsky turns to Spinoza at the end of his life, he does so to develop a theory of the emotions that he had not been able to address before, and that he never got the time to complete (Vygotsky, 1999). From the publications and personal notes of Vygotsky’s last period, however, we know that this shift in orientation was his attempt to bring “life against a deadly pale psychology of abstractions” (Vygotsky in Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 214). He would do so, he hoped, by reviving “Spinozism in Marxist psychology” (p. 209).

In Chapter 1 of Thinking and Speech, written at about the same time as these notes, we read Vygotsky’s complaint that, in prior psychological theory, “thinking was divorced from the full vitality of life, from the motives, interests, and inclinations of the thinking individual” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 50). But, in his view, understanding the unity of intellect and affect over the course of development was the key to creating psychology into a truly scientific endeavor. By isolating thinking from affect, Vygotsky argued, “we effectively cut ourselves off from any potential for a causal explanation of thinking” (p. 50). However, because this chapter was among the last parts of the book to be written, these statements remain only programmatic—a situation that Vygotsky himself recognized—and have remained so to this day.

Revisiting Vygotsky’s relation to Spinoza, thus, offers an opportunity to better understand the intellectual sources of CHAT from an historical perspective. But also—and most important, in our view—it offers opportunities for examining the internal logic and developmental potential of a line of thinking that may still prove fruitful for further development of today’s and tomorrow’s CHAT’s research program.

The symposium

The symposium includes four articles by five scholars who have focused on the intellectual sources of, and developments within, Soviet philosophy and psychology. Two of them—Blunden’s and Toassa and de Oliveira’s—will help readers to locate Spinoza’s influence on Vygotsky in its historical and intellectual context. The other two, by Maidansky and Surmava, propose two opposed yet compelling and informed positions on the role of Spinoza’s thought in Vygotsky’s theory in general and of the role that the affects play in that theory more specifically.

With “Spinoza in the History of Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory,” Andy Blunden opens the symposium by reviewing the place of Spinoza in the history of CHAT and, in passing, in the history of science more generally. Blunden traces a genealogy of Spinoza’s influence on Soviet psychology through German idealism and Marx. He does so drawing on the essay “Dialectical Logic, Essays on its History and Theory,” written by Edval Ilyenkov, a figure crucial in the development of Russian Marxist philosophy and cultural historical theories of activity. He is also someone who explicitly embraced Spinoza’s substance monism to develop his dialectical materialism. Blunden reviews three aspects of that essay: Spinoza’s contributions according to Ilyenkov; Spinoza’s shortcomings according to Ilyenkov; and one innovation that, according to Blunden, escaped Ilyenkov. The latter innovation concerns Spinoza’s distinction of a type of emotions that are active (as opposed to passions, which are passive) and that would make futile any discussions separating the concept of activity from that of emotion or making one more fundamental over the other.

In noting this “innovation,” Blunden touches on a problem that will become the center around which Maidansky’s and Surmava’s contributions will orbit, and which Blunden briefly discusses: The issue of whether the affects should and could be a germ cell for human (Marxist) psychology. Rather than a full-fledged elaboration on the issue—which we will find in the articles by Maidansky and Surmava—Blunden offers an outline of the context and thinking of Spinoza, an appraisal of what the author perceives as Spinoza’s “antiquity,” as well as main lines of influence up to today’s CHAT literature on emotions.

In “Spinoza in Cultural-Historical Psychology,” Andrey Maidansky presents the first of two more substantial contributions from Russian scholars elaborating on the analytical premises and consequences of Vygotsky’s interpretation of Spinoza. Whereas Blunden sets the stage by situating Spinoza in the history of thinking prior, during and after the development of Vygotsky’s theory, Maidansky
describes precisely which Spinozan categories were crucial in Vygotsky’s interpretation and how these led Vygotsky to the formulation of affect as the germ cell of the psyche, that is, as the most fundamental category from which all other “essential forms of psychical life” (p. XX) can be deduced.3

To substantiate this position, Maidansky begins reviewing Vygotsky’s (1999) efforts to elaborate on a nondualist theory of the emotions by building upon Spinoza. According to Maidansky, Vygotsky is interested in understanding the “immanent cause of emotions” (p. XX), a cause that could not be reduced to either physiological cause or psychical cause, which would imply dualism. Maidansky identifies in Spinoza’s concept of appetitus—appetitus or “the striving to act”—what Vygotsky needed for his nondualist theory. Appetite “manifests itself, simultaneously, in corporeal (hunger, sexual desire, etc.) and in mental (conscious desires, cupiditates) affects” (p. XX). More specifically, the proper category for the “essence of man” is not just appetite, but appetitus socialis, a conclusion that, Maidansky admits, Vygotsky did not himself formulate, but would follow directly “from the logic of cultural-historical theory” (p. XX).

Affect—Maidansky concludes—becomes for Vygotsky the “germ cell,” the most fundamental category for the study of human psyche. It is important to note that, in making this claim, Maidansky is referring to “higher, cultural emotions” (p. XX), which are distinct from those of other higher animals in that human affects have a special relation with the intellect. It is therefore the tensions and contradictions between intellect and affect—manifested in Vygotsky’s interest on the dialectical relations between concepts and affects, and between thinking and speech—what characterize humans. From this view, Spinozist psychology can be defined as “the science about the production of affects (in the process of objective activity) and the exchange of affects (in the process of communication)” (p. XX).

Maidansky’s exposition is met with a diametrically opposed argument in Alexander Surmava’s article, “Spinoza in the Science of Object-Oriented Activity.” If Maidansky had defined affect as the germ cell of a Spinozist psychology, Surmava categorically states, “a Spinozan psychology is as impossible as a Darwinian doctrine of divine creation” (p. XX). For Surmava, if one assumes Spinozian monism, the proper science of human cannot be a science that separates “psyche” from the human body and praxis. Where Maidansky had argued that “there is no activity without passion” and that “nothing other than affect is a specifically psychological component of any vital activity” (p. XX), Surmava argues that “before and without regard to objective activity, there is neither subject nor object” (p. XX) and that, therefore, affects cannot be a primary category.

Central to Surmava’s argument is the view that confronting intellect and affect as two moments of a dialectical unit involves a form of category error. Intellect and affect cannot be dialectically opposed within the same unit, for, according to Surmava, thinking itself is activity. Surmava thus finds problematic “any attempt to antithesize affect and the intellect by treating the former as being more fundamental that the latter” (p. XX). Affect is not only opposite but also “secondary” with respect to thinking, which in turn is understood as object-oriented activity.

In support of this position, Surmava cites Ilyenkov’s idea of the thinking body as the “theoretically accurate formulation of Spinoza’s central idea” (p. XX). According to this idea, “thought is the mode of action of the thinking body” (p. XX), and therefore it is itself human activity, which encompasses (and does not derive from) human affects. Following this idea to its end, Surmava goes so far as to reject the idea of a science of the psyche and argues that not psyche object-oriented activity should be the object of materialist science, in the spirit of “[Nikolai] Bernstein’s ‘activity biology’” and “Marx’s political economy” (p. XX). According to Surmava, having rightly identified Spinozism and the problem of freedom as the most central problem for a materialist psychology, Vygotsky, however, took an idealist road.

Closing the symposium, Gisele Toassa and Fernando Bonadia de Oliveira offer an analysis of what they refer to as Vygotsky’s Anomalous Spinozism. This “anomaly” concerns Vygotsky’s original interpretation, which contrasted with that of other Marxist thinkers of his time. According to Toassa and de Oliveira, Vygotsky’s reading was “ahead of his time” in a number of respects.
The assumption that Spinoza’s thinking is the precursor of and consistent with dialectical materialism is more or less explicitly present in the other three articles, but Toassa and de Oliveira offer alternative ways in which other contemporary scholars in the Soviet context interpreted Spinoza as a materialistic thinker. Although many of the Russian authors who are cited will be unfamiliar to most Western readers, the article provides a rich overview of other ways in which Spinoza was influential in the development of dialectical materialism, but also a clearer sense of the way in which Vygotsky’s thinking was both relevant and original with respect to his time. Most characteristic in Vygotsky’s take was, according to the authors, that it opens the possibility for engaging Marxist psychology in a “broader ethical as well as political leftist theoretical dialogue” toward a “new model of man,” as well as for new forms of democracy” (p. XX).

**Spinoza and Vygotsky in today’s and tomorrow’s CHAT**

“The problems of Spinoza await their solution, without which tomorrow’s day in our psychology is impossible.” — Vygotsky (1999, p. 222)

Having briefly situated the present symposium in the larger literature about Vygotsky’s Spinoza, and having provided a brief but, we hope, informative outline of some of the ideas elaborated in the contributions, a crucial question remains: Why should this symposium be relevant to present-day scholarship?

The symposium delves into topics, such as the mind–body problem or the problem of freedom, that were first raised many centuries ago, not just by Spinoza but by many before him, not the least of all Descartes—a figure almost as present in the symposium articles as Spinoza. The symposium discusses these topics as they came to influence the work of a psychologist who died decades ago and whose work, as influential as it has been, remained nonetheless unfinished. So, what can be learned from looking back at the relation between Spinoza in Vygotsky that could be of use today? If Vygotsky was correct, that “the problems of Spinoza await their solution, without which tomorrow’s day in our psychology is impossible,” what is to be gained revisiting and reconsidering the role of Spinoza in current and future CHAT?

A first question of relevance to contemporary scholarship has an historical dimension and concerns the extent to which Spinoza’s influence can actually be traced back to Vygotsky’s texts and concepts. Independent of the different analyses presented in this symposium, there can be no doubt that Spinoza had a profound and significant impact in Vygotsky’s thinking in particular and, indirectly, in the development of CHAT more generally. The articles in this symposium offer a multiperspectival view of the varied ways in which Spinoza’s thinking was present in Vygotsky’s theorizing. Although Maidansky connects Vygotsky’s interests on Spinoza with his final work on the emotions, his late studies on child psychology and defectology, as well as the idea of perezhivanie and the relation between thinking and speech, Toassa and de Oliveira make reference to different essays from the early and later works focusing on consciousness as a system of interconnected, mutually transforming functions. By tracing these different signposts connecting Spinozist ideas and Vygotsky’s different works, we not only get a better sense of Vygotsky’s intellectual development but also can better assess the origin and significance of different Vygotskian concepts that are currently being used, often in applied research.

The question of what it means “to be a Spinozist in the second decade of the 21st century” (Surmava, p. XX) or what it means “to be a Spinozist today” (Blunden, p. XX) is directly raised in the papers, all of which offer means for further understanding not just Spinoza’s influence on Vygotsky but also the diverse aspects present in Spinoza’s philosophy that can inform the development of theory in the current study of human activities. Blunden reviews those elements that become visible and those that become invisible from the materialist lenses of Ilyenkov, whereas Toassa and the Oliveira examine the broad reach of ideas that describe Spinoza as a materialist thinker that would allow developing a politically aware research agenda. Maidansky and Surmava, in turn, strive to find
in Spinoza that core element without which a science would no longer be “Spinozist.” For Maidansky, this consists in the establishment of appetitus socialis as a core category for what it means to be human, whereas for Surmava it is the idea of the thinking body. Certainly, the reader is not left short of possible entry points from which to engage with Spinoza’s work, despite the apparent “antiquity” (see Blunden, this issue) of his ideas.

But beyond the historical relevance of these diverse elements and ideas, there is the timeless, theoretical question of the constitution of a nondualist science, whether we call it a scientific psychology or a science of object-oriented activity. For if there is something else that all four articles agree upon is the observation that Vygotsky turned to Spinoza not to merely “inform” or “influence” his developing theory but, most centrally, to search for that system of thought that would allow overcoming the systemic Cartesian dualism that otherwise characterizes all classical approaches. So, do the articles in this symposium bring us any closer to achieving that goal?

Attending to the diversity of ideas reviewed and the differences between arguments, it may at first appear that there is no possible single answer to this question. In fact, the categorical disagreement between the positions presented by Maidansky and Surmava may seem insurmountable. It is not an accident that Maidansky and Surmava’s disagreement is presented as an account of the issue that led Vygotsky and Leontiev to part ways. Although Maidansky defends Vygotsky’s Spinozism, asserting that Soviet psychology scholars such as Leontiev and Ilyenkov “moved away from Spinozism” (p. XX), Surmava defends the idea that Leontiev and Ilyenkov, and not Vygotsky, were the actual Spinozists. The contraposition of affects/perezhivanie versus object-oriented activity, of Vygotsky versus Leontiev, is thereby revived. Is it possible to achieve a nondualist science without taking sides?

As editors, our intention is not to encourage taking sides, but to invite the reader to consider the grounds upon which each of the different arguments can be defended and the assumptions that one needs to make “to see” perezhivanie as an idealist concept, or to see object-oriented activity as a behaviorist one. For it is not in adopting one or another position where the developmental opportunity lies, but in delving into and trying to overcome the tensions and contradictions that become available when dealing with the Spinozist questions. If the articles in this symposium have it right that “insofar as we are worthy continuators of Goethe, Hegel, Marx, Vygotsky, etc., we are all Spinozists” (Blunden, p. XX); if it is true that, despite their “errors” and differences, “Spinoza, Fichte, Hegel and Marx are not individual writers whose texts should be ‘interpreted’ in a ‘subjective’ way … but … should be seen as participants in a common cause, co-authors of one single, scientific philosophy” (Surmava, p. XX), then we may have made some progress despite of, or precisely because of, our differences.

Notes

1. The phrase *Voluntas et intellectus unum et idem sunt* (Will and understanding are one and the same) appears in *The Ethics*, and Vygotsky refers to it as early as his notes from 1928, when he was developing the ideas in his *History of the Development of the Higher Psychological Functions* (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 118).
2. It is appropriate to note that contemporary neuroscientists, too, have turned to Spinoza to inform their theories and empirical research on the emotions (Damasio, 2003).
3. A chronology of the writing of the different chapters in *Thinking and Speech* can be found in Yasnitsky and van der Veer (2016).
4. In concluding *Thinking and Speech*, Vygotsky (1987) acknowledges, “Our investigation has brought us to the threshold of a problem that is broader, more profound, and still more extraordinary than the problem of thinking. It has brought us to the threshold of the problem of consciousness” (p. 285).
5. A discussion on the origin and meaning of the concept “germ cell” in cultural-historical theory can be found in Blunden (2017).
6. In fact, Surmava and Blunden’s (but not Toassa and de Oliveira’s) articles were both written after and partly as a response to Maidansky’s original article.
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References


