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A Contribution on the Question of the Concept of “Activity” and Its Significance for Pedagogy

The discussion raised on the pages of the journal *Voprosy filosofii* by A.N. Leontiev seems to me not only very timely but also very well-aimed. So I would like to regard the fact that the appearance of A.N.’s articles and the establishment of our seminar occurred at the same time as a happy coincidence. Evidently, the concept of *activity* is indeed the key concept that alone makes it possible to unite the efforts of pedagogues, psychologists, and philosophers in accomplishing the central task of our entire education system—the task of organizing it on the basis of a clear system of theoretical ideas. It seems to me that this concept can be likened to a crystal cast into the supersaturated solution of our pedagogical thinking.

The need to create a single system of theoretical foundations for the organization of teaching-educational work in our schools is, indeed, very acute, very urgent. The most reliable sign of the tenseness of the situation is the rapidity with which “epicenters” have recently been arising and disappearing in the atmosphere of our pedagogical thought—points of attraction around which sympathizers immediately start to gather. Now it is the idea of “programmed teaching,” now “genetic pedagogy,” now “developmental teaching,” and now “cybernetics,” “information theory,” and similar fashionable

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trends. By no means do these enthusiasms pass without leaving a trace: they are absorbed willingly, even greedily. You only have to peruse any guide to pedagogy written in recent years in order to discover traces of all of the short-lived enthusiasms—something like a layered pie or a cross-section of geological strata.

What will you *not* find there?! External feedbacks and branching programs, talk about genetic factors underlying ability and the role of the environment, and about the role of Communist Youth League (Komsomol) organizations.

Of course, there is also talk about the significance of “activity,” the importance of independent activeness in the course of mastering material. Sometimes there is even a lot of talk, and at first glance it seems that what is said is correct. In fact, however, this talk remains one fragment among others: its removal would not affect the rest of the picture in the least. But this just goes to show that the process of education (and upbringing) is understood in isolation from any connection with the main characteristic of the specifically human relation to the world and to other people, with what made and makes a human being a human being—with the process of changing nature, with object-oriented activity in the most serious meaning of this expression.

In general form this has already been said with adequate clarity. And the point, evidently, is not to repeat it once more in general form. I shall therefore try to analyze one very well-known pedagogical problem that causes our schools, both higher and secondary, much trouble. And it will, perhaps, cause them increasing trouble as time goes on.

I have in view the problem that is ordinarily referred to as the problem of *applying knowledge to life* or in “practice.” It does not need to be proven, I think, that this is a painful problem. It is, moreover, a problem that requires a fundamental solution, a theoretical and practical solution.

Is there such a problem? There is. Often—and more often than it may seem—the graduate of our education system does not know how to apply the knowledge that he has acquired at school to the solution of the tasks and problems that he has to deal with outside the school walls. The situation is absurd: a person *knows* how it is necessary to act in accordance with science, but nonetheless acts as though he did *not know* this. And this is not because he does not want to act in accordance with science, but because he is unable to do so.

A rather strange phenomenon, if you think about it. Indeed, the knowledge appears to be there, the object to which this knowledge is to be applied is at hand, and there is a burning desire to apply it, but for some reason the knowledge is *not* “applied.”

Hence arises the idea that among human abilities and “skills” there must be

a special ability that is distinct from knowledge itself—the ability to “apply” the knowledge in one’s possession.

And the question arises: can this special skill be *learned and taught*?

If this special skill can be taught, this means that a special kind of activity exists (or should exist)—the activity of correlating knowledge with its object (of bringing them into mutual relation). This means that special “rules” should exist, in accordance with which this activity is performed.

And so people start to seek out and formulate rules for correlating knowledge with its object—or, more precisely, for correlating general theoretical formulas with direct object-related situations. They start to classify typical mistakes made in the course of this activity for the purpose of warning against these typical mistakes.

They do not notice that the problem they are trying to solve is insoluble in principle, in its very essence, and that the only solution to it may be to make the problem itself impossible, so that it does not and cannot arise.

In other words, the only way to solve this problem is to eliminate the conditions that give rise to it.

The point is that the “knowledge” that still has to be specially correlated with its object is by no means *knowledge* as such, but only an illusion, only a surrogate for knowledge.

In this connection, the distinction that Leontiev draws here between “knowledge” and “conviction” seems to me not altogether precise. The borderline, it seems to me, passes not between knowledge and conviction, but between genuine knowledge and illusory knowledge. This is the difference between knowledge *of the object* and purely formal—that is, purely verbal—familiarity with terms, symbols, signs, and combinations thereof, with *phrases*.

The word “knowledge” is sometimes really used to mean only the latter—namely, mastery of the *language* of a particular field of knowledge, mastery of its terminology and the ability to use this terminology.

What takes place here is by no means the mastering of the *object* of knowledge (and knowledge can consist of nothing but this), but merely the mastering of *phrases* about this object, merely the mastering of the verbal shell of knowledge *in place of* knowledge.

Here lies the root of that illusion out of which then grows the peculiar and essentially absurd and irrational problem of “correlating” knowledge with its object. This is a problem that by its very nature does not and cannot have a rational solution.

This was understood very well by as subtle an analyst as Immanuel Kant. His *Critique of Pure Reason* contains a very acute analysis of the situation I have described. The essence of this analysis is as follows.

If the knowledge that a person masters at school consists of a certain aggregate of *concepts, definitions, and formulas* and their combinations in *judgments, deductions, and systems of deductions*, that is, in a collection of *rules* that constitute professional erudition, then apart from this collection of rules one other quite special task remains for mental activity—namely, the task of placing individual, particular, special cases under these rules, the task of placing *the special under the universal*.

It is here, as a rule, that the breakdown occurs.

This ability, as Kant quite accurately defines its special task, consists in knowing how to distinguish whether or not a given case *comes under* a given rule. Kant called this special ability the *power of judgment*. And it is impossible in principle to acquire this specific ability in the form of another rule. And for a very simple reason: a rule—precisely because it is a rule, that is, something general—in its turn requires guidance from the power of judgment, that is, from the ability to distinguish whether or not a given case of *application* of the rule comes under the rule that we have formulated for such application.

And thus it appears that, though understanding is capable of being instructed, and of being equipped with rules, judgment is a peculiar talent that can be practiced only, and cannot be taught. It is the specific quality of so-called mother-wit; and its lack no school can make good. For although an abundance of rules borrowed from the insight of others may indeed be proffered to, and as it were grafted upon, a limited understanding, the power of rightly employing them must belong to the learner himself; and in the absence of such a natural gift no rule that may be prescribed to him for this purpose can ensure against misuse.

Deficiency in judgment is just what is ordinarily called stupidity, and for such a failing there is no remedy. An obtuse or narrow-minded person to whom nothing is wanting save a proper degree of understanding and the concepts appropriate thereto, may indeed be trained through study, even to the extent of becoming learned. But as such people are commonly still lacking in judgment, it is not unusual to meet learned men who in the application of their scientific knowledge betray that original want, which can never be made good. (vol. 3, pp. 217–29)

From this directly follows the conclusion that the power of judgment is an *innate* ability. It makes no difference whether it comes from God or from Nature. If a child is born with it, he can and should be educated. If not, no education, however refined, will be of help.

Hence the tradition that comes down from this reasoning of Kant sharply divides people into two categories—people who act in accordance with rules that originate in the minds of others and people who are able to derive rules from experience and apply them intelligently.

The majority of people, naturally, fall into the first class or category. And the minds of people of this sort operate in accordance with schemas that resemble the schemas of action of a trained animal more than the actions of a human being. Such a mind acts in strict accordance with schemas of formally mastered “rules” and is unable to cope with a task in which the objective situation makes it impossible to act in accordance with a schema given in advance.

The question arises: is there any way out? There is. And the way out is very simple in principle, although very difficult to find in terms of concrete pedagogy.

The way out is as follows. The entire art of the pedagogue must, from the very start, focus not on inculcating set rules regarded as tools or instruments of action, but on organizing the external, objective conditions under which learning activity is to take place.

In other words, the pedagogue must concern himself first of all with creating a system of conditions of action that impose on the student such and such a method of action.

And when the action is accomplished, the pedagogue can and must bring to light the rule or schema to which this action was forced to comply. Then this rule can and must be given expression in words and signs. Then—and not before—the rule can be brought into verbalized consciousness.

In this case, the student is already able to handle the object in conformity with the requirements set by the nature of the object, and not by a “rule” or schema of action given in advance and independently of action with the object.

Here we have a very curious and very cunning dialectic.

If you induce the ability to act in accordance with a rule by means of an external situation that requires a certain method of action but exists outside the student’s consciousness and independently of his will, then the student will master the rule as a subjective form (or method) of action with the object.

But if you do the opposite, if you present the rule in the form of “the rule as such,” that is, as a schema for the subject’s action, then the student will not master the rule as a schema for subjective action. He will master it precisely as an external schema, as an *object* alongside other objects, as a *thing* that possesses certain properties. Consider, for instance, a formula or algorithm. The student will learn to act with them in the same way that he acts with any other external thing.

We have here a psychological paradox: in both cases the pedagogue achieves a result exactly opposite to the result he intended.

If he conveys a “rule” through organization of the objective situation, that is, not as a rule but as a set of external conditions of action, then he achieves the desired result: the rule is mastered as a rule of subjective activity.

But if he presents the rule precisely as a schema for subjective activity (as a sequence of operations), then the rule is mastered as one more object, one more external thing with which special actions have to be produced—namely, actions to bring it into a special mutual relation with another thing.

For this reason, thinkers who have taken the difficulties highlighted by Kant as their point of departure have insisted that the subjective mode of action with things arises and takes shape solely and exclusively in acts of real activity with things and cannot be given a priori as a schema of action. To learn to swim you have to get into the water, as Hegel liked to say.

Provided that the starting point is real action with an object, accompanied by observation of the method of action (“reflexion”), the rule is mastered directly as a requirement imposed on action by the *object*—in other words, directly in the form of a thing. Knowledge then appears to the student precisely as *knowledge of the thing*, and not as a special structure situated outside the thing that still somehow has to be “applied” to this thing by performing some sort of special actions.

This is a very serious mental reorientation of the personality, entailing a quite different type of mental relation both to knowledge and to the object.

In one case the student finds before him, as it were, two objects that he is forced somehow to relate to one another while remaining separate from both.

In the other case he finds before him only *one single* object, because from the very start he *merges* with the other object (with knowledge). This occurs because he emerges as the subject of action with the object, as personified knowledge, as knowledge that has direct mutual relation with things, as *knowledge of things*. And not knowledge of the phrases that other people have used in reference to these things.

It is here that the fateful difference lies. A person sees and knows an object much more rarely than he imagines. Usually in an object he sees only what he knows from the words of other people, because in essence he does not encounter the object itself. For he is acquainted not with the object, but with what has already been written about this object in books, guides, instructions, and textbooks. And after all, as they say, that is two big differences.*

*It was a well-known joke in the Soviet Union to call a big difference “two big differences.” The joke is said to have originated in Odessa.—Trans.