

## Vygotsky's Idea of *Gestalt* and its Origins

**Abstract:** The origins of Vygotsky's conception of Gestalt in Goethe, Hegel and Marx is traced, demonstrating how this concept forms not only a methodological foundation for Vygotsky, but is the key concept through which this series of thinkers has overcome various forms of dualism. Vygotsky's use of the concept in his unfinished work on child development is reviewed and it is shown how this conception of Gestalt sheds new light on the concept of Zone of Proximal Development.

A notion of Gestalt is essential to Vygotsky's psychology and his theory of development, but his idea of Gestalt was not derived from Koffka and Köhler. In the 1920s, Vygotsky did engage in a critique of Gestalt psychology, which presented itself at the time as the left-wing of psychology, with its critique of the dominant associationist psychology. And Vygotsky did appropriate concepts of structural psychology from this critique, but his view was much larger. As he put it:

“having smashed atomism, (Gestalt psychology) replaced the atom by the independent and isolated molecule.” (*Preface to Koffka*, 1934, in Vygotsky 1997: 230)

What Vygotsky meant by this criticism was that the *Gestalt* should not be seen simply as a formation of the psyche, but must include the individual psyche within the whole system of social interactions which constitutes the individual as a person. This larger concept of *Gestalt* had made its way into Vygotsky's thinking, from its origins with Goethe more than a century earlier, but by an entirely different route.

‘Gestalt’ is an untranslatable German word that has been imported into other languages. The normal meaning of *Gestalt* in German is ‘figure’ as in ‘what a fine figure of a man’, referring to the overall dynamic configuration of a living thing, sometimes translated as ‘formation’ (as in ‘social formation’) or ‘form’ or ‘shape’, which cannot be expressed simply in terms of its constituent parts. But in other languages ‘Gestalt’ is used only in the sense given to the word by Gestalt Psychology, as an integral structure or indivisible *whole*. (OED 1989)

### Goethe (1749-1832)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was already an acclaimed poet before Immanuel Kant had made his name with *The Critique of Pure Reason* in 1787; he towered over the world of Hegel and Schopenhauer and even after his death, oversaw the education of German-speakers from Marx and Wundt to Freud and Jung and had a huge impact in Russia as well. In the context of development, Goethe explained *Gestalt* as follows:

“The Germans have a word for the complex of existence presented by a physical organism: *Gestalt*. With this expression they exclude what is changeable and assume that an interrelated whole is identified, defined, and fixed in character.

“But if we look at all these *Gestalten*, especially the organic ones, we will discover that *nothing in them is permanent*, nothing is at rest or defined - everything is in a flux of continual motion. This is why German frequently

and fittingly makes use of the word *Bildung*<sup>1</sup> to describe the end product and what is in process of production as well.

“Thus in setting forth a morphology we should not speak of *Gestalt*, or if we use the term we should at least do so only in reference to the idea, the concept, or to an empirical element held fast for a mere moment of time.”

(*The purpose is set forth*, 1817, Goethe 1996)

So, *Gestalt* is a transitory, developing form, whilst the real whole is the *whole process of development*; to know something meant to comprehend its whole process of development. Goethe insisted that forms could be perceived by human beings, because human thought was part of the same whole which generated those forms. But it was the idea that human beings perceived a whole *Gestalt*, independently of and prior to the parts, which was taken up at first by Kant, in his aesthetics, and much later by Christian von Ehrenfels, and what later became Gestalt psychology.

Whilst the impact of sensations as a source of knowledge of the objective world seemed clear enough, since antiquity philosophers had been troubled by the source of *conceptual* knowledge (Robinson 1995). Kant, for example, had proposed a separate faculty of reason with access to the logical categories, working side by side with a faculty of intuition accessing the data of sensation (Kant 2007). Late 19th century scientists wanted to resolve these problems by finding the source of concepts, or *at least form*, in sensation itself. In his influential *Analysis of Sensations*, Ernst Mach went so far as to hypothesise additional sense organs which could acquire visual or auditory *forms*, alongside “elements” like colour, pitch and so on (Mach 1914). Drawing on Goethe’s idea, von Ehrenfels proposed that the whole form of a thing could be represented to consciousness, not just separately and alongside its elements, but *prior* to its elements (Anderson 1980). The Gestaltists, such as Köhler, insisted that mind itself had to have Gestalt properties in order to apprehend the Gestalt properties of phenomena (Herrnstein 1965), but nonetheless, for Gestalt Psychology the problem remained within the framework of an external object stimulating the senses of an individual organism. In the meantime, the problem of the source of *conceptual* knowledge had been quietly reduced to that of perception of *form* implicit in sensuous stimuli. The idea of a whole which is prior to its parts did lay the basis for a structural conception of consciousness, and a theory of development which involved structural transformations, but the problems of perception remained the only domain where Gestalt Psychology had made real progress.

But Goethe’s insistence that forms could be perceived by human beings, because human thought was part of the same whole which generated those forms, was part of a very profound approach to science which went further than problems of perception.

In a thoroughgoing rejection of metaphysics, he insisted that living things, human beings included, must be known by their deeds. Goethe vigorously denied that the truth of a phenomenon could be some non-phenomenal formula, essence, principle or hypothetical mechanism, ‘vibration’ or force ‘behind’ phenomena. Thus, Goethe set himself against

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<sup>1</sup> *Bildung* is another uniquely German word meaning the process of acquiring the culture of one’s times, becoming a cultured person. Originally, *Bildung* referred only to the shaping, forming, cultivating of objects, but took on the meaning of ‘education’ in the 18th century; Goethe is renowned for his *Bildungsroman*, novels narrating the personal development of the central character, and it became a central concept for Herder, Hegel, Schiller and &c.

the dominant Newtonian method of seeking an explanation of natural phenomena in hidden laws and forces, in themselves inaccessible to perception, though inferred with the aid of mathematics. At the same time, in opposition to naïve Empiricism, he understood that all perceptions were ‘theory laden’. In his words:

“The ultimate goal would be: to grasp that everything in the realm of fact is already theory. ... Let us not seek for something *behind* the phenomena - they themselves are the theory.” (*Maxims and Reflections*, Goethe 1996)

So what was necessary was to hold off so far as possible from making hypotheses, whilst expanding so far as possible the field of phenomena, and then using intuitive perception (*Anschauung*<sup>2</sup>), to find *within* the field of phenomena, the simple, archetypal form, the *Urphänomen*<sup>3</sup>, which united all of the phenomena. Such a form would unify the domain of phenomena not by means of an abstract general ‘pseudo-concept’, that is, a common attribute shared by all, but as a genuinely generative principle, simultaneously conceptual and phenomenal:

“The *Urphänomen* is not to be regarded as a basic theorem leading to a variety of consequences, but rather as a basic manifestation enveloping the specifications of form for the beholder.” (Letter to von Buttel, 3 May 1827, Goethe 1996)

Goethe successfully applied this idea in his founding of the science of morphology, in which the *Urphänomen* is known as the *cell* (or germ-cell), but it must be granted that Goethe did not fully work out this idea as an approach to science in general. Nonetheless, his claim that phenomena could be understood only by means of a *simple prototypical phenomenon which captures the properties of the whole process of development*, was to be taken up by Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky, each in turn giving it a more definite worked-out formulation.

### Hegel (1770-1831)

In the late 18th century, a number of philosophers, including Kant and Herder (Herder 2004) as well as Hegel, were interested in the conditions which went into the formation of the national character or ‘spirit of a nation’. Herder’s ideas became important in the development of cultural anthropology in the 19th century and helped shaped ideas of people like Franz Boas (Foley 1997: 193). Hegel’s early investigations did not lead him to a developed study of national difference, but they did provide the basis for a psychology which approached the individual as a product of society, rather than seeing society as an aggregate of individuals.

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2 *Anschauung* is usually translated as ‘intuition’. The verb *schauen* means to see or view as in *Weltanschauung* = worldview, and entered philosophy when Meister Eckhart translated the Latin *contemplatio*, the activity of contemplating something, especially the divine. Kant however took *Anschauung* to be exclusively sensory, rejecting the possibility of intellectual intuition, so the senses were the only source of form or shape.

3 *Urphänomen* is unique to Goethe; the prefix ‘*ur*’ means primitive, original or earliest, and is usually translated as ‘archetypal’. *Phänomen* means phenomenon, that is appearance. Is represented as ‘abstract notion’ in Hegel’s *Logic*, exemplified by the ‘commodity relation’ in Marx’s critique of political economy, and ‘word meaning’ in Vygotsky.

In his 1802/3 manuscript, *System of Ethical Life* (Hegel 1979), Hegel proposed a solution to the problem of the source of *conceptual* knowledge. Hegel proposed that knowledge was reconstructed by individuals through the practical use of artefacts which had been fashioned as objectifications of the inherited knowledge of a community. This would explain how practical, sensuous perception *already included* forms of conceptual knowledge and how thinking and perception developed along with social and cultural change. The paradigmatic activities which Hegel saw as constructing the universal ‘spirit’ of a community were: the labour process, using tools and means of production; communication, using words and other symbols; and the raising of children to be future bearers of the culture. The *consciousness* entailed in these activities, the *artefacts* being used and the collaborative forms of *activity* formed *a single whole*, i.e., a *Gestalt*. Each aspect of this trichotomy *constituted* the others: consciousness was the individual’s orientation to use of the artefact, the artefact was what it was only in and through its use in some particular activity through which it was (re-)created, and an activity was constituted by people’s motives or ideals and the artefacts they used to construct it.

As Daniel Robinson so aptly put it:

“(Hegel) and Beethoven were born in the same year. One set Goethe to music, the other to philosophy.” (Robinson 1995: 287)

This conception of a whole which is prior to its individual parts is possible only thanks to the transcendence of the thought-matter dichotomy. Hegel’s idea of a *Gestalt*, sometimes translated as ‘configuration’ or ‘shape of consciousness’ (*Gestalt des Bewußtseins*), which was simultaneously a social formation or ‘way of life’ (including both labour processes and superstructure), a ‘way of thinking’ or spiritual culture/ideology of a community, and a material culture, including spoken words and human body forms as well as means of production, land, etc.

In order to reproduce itself and continue to develop, communities have to raise their children into the use of the culture. The following excerpt from the Preface to the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* shows how Hegel saw the individual appropriating the culture of his or her community:

“The particular individual, so far as content is concerned, has also to go through the stages through which the general mind has passed, but as shapes (*Gestalten*) once assumed by mind and now laid aside, as stages of a road which has been worked over and levelled out. Hence it is that, in the case of various kinds of knowledge, we find that what in former days occupied the energies of men of mature mental ability sinks to the level of information, exercises, and even pastimes, for children; and in this educational progress we can see the history of the world’s culture delineated in faint outline. This bygone mode of existence has already become an acquired possession of the general mind, which constitutes the substance of the individual, and, by thus appearing externally to him, furnishes his inorganic nature. In this respect culture or development of mind (*Bildung*), regarded from the side of the individual, consists in his acquiring what lies at his hand ready for him, in making its inorganic nature organic to himself, and taking possession of it for himself. Looked at, however, from the side of universal mind *qua* general spiritual substance, culture means nothing else than that this substance gives

itself its own self-consciousness, brings about its own inherent process and its own reflection into self.” (Hegel 1807/1910)

Hegel did not and could not, at the turn of the 19th century, solve the problem of exactly *how* individuals learn, and the notion of history as progress of spirit in his work is a matter of considerable dispute, but he set the terms in which the problem of individual learning could be solved. None of the Gestalt psychologists ever acknowledged a debt to Hegel (Robinson 1995: 353), but Marx was quite explicit in what he owed to Hegel.

### Marx (1818-1883)

In his appropriation of Hegel’s philosophy, Karl Marx made a number of important modifications relevant to the question of how the idea of *Gestalt* was received in the twentieth century. (Marx 1996: 19) “Gestalt” is a common word in German, and in the contexts in which it appears in Marx’s writing it is usually translated as ‘form’ or ‘shape’ (as in value in the ‘shape’ of a commodity) or ‘formation’ (as in ‘social formation’). Like Hegel, Marx always treated consciousness as the relation of the individual to its environment, not as a form distinct from its content. Marx differed with Hegel over the terms in which the whole formation (*Gestalt*) had to be understood. In his own words:

“The premises from which we begin are ... the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.” (*The German Ideology*, Marx 1976: 31)

So for Marx the developing whole which Hegel took to be an aggregate of ‘thought-forms’, Marx took to be *activity*: “the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions.”

“All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.” (*Theses on Feuerbach* §8, Marx 1976: 5)

Marx makes *practical human activity* the key category. A *Gestalt* is not primarily a thought-form, but a system of social practices, inclusive of the individuals enacting them and their conditions of their existence, and he makes the *material production of people’s needs* the archetypal activity, determinant in relation to the spiritual life of the community in general:

“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.” (*Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx 1987: 263)

As the productive forces of society develop, the system of relations in which these forces are activated become an actual fetter on production and impede development, so they

have to be overthrown. Thus, Marx makes the struggle of people to *emancipate* themselves from the very system of relations whereby their needs are met, the motor force of development.

“At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or - this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms - with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.” (*Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx 1987: 263)

Like Hegel, Marx saw individual psychology as a moment of the social formation (*Gestalt*) of which it is a part, but not the ‘unit of analysis’ or concept from which an understanding of a social formation could be understood.

### Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934)

Almost everything about how Vygotsky appropriated the ideas of Goethe, Hegel, and Marx flowed from his situation in the early years of the Soviet Union, an environment saturated with Marxism and with a mandate to work towards fostering a new, higher type of human being, ‘socialist man’.

This situation made it possible for Vygotsky to draw on the insights of Marx and Hegel which had been lost as a result of the analytical kind of science preferred by the dominant positivist ideology of the late 19th/early 20th century. Like Marx, Vygotsky conceived of the *Gestalt*, not just as a brain structure or scheme of perception, but as a system of social relationships and activity, which included the person in the social situation through which the person’s needs are met. In constructing a psychology, Vygotsky’s focus moved to the sphere of activity of a single individual, in contrast to Marx’s focus on whole social formations. But both Marx and Vygotsky took social practice, individual consciousness and material culture to mutually constitute one another, as part of a *Gestalt*. This structural approach contrasts with methodological individualism, characterised by mind/matter and individual/society dichotomies. The conception of mind as a *Gestalt* in which practices, culture and thinking mutual constitute one another, does not mean that sociology and psychology become identical; the oppositions are not abolished but *mediated*.

The child is the child of the existing social formation, but not simply and immediately so, for the relation is mediated through the family and other institutions. Equally, the whole is not conceived as something which exists side by side with individuals, or on another ‘level’, but exists only in and through individuals.

What is characteristic of the *Gestalt* is that it is practical activity, consciousness and material conditions are *taken together*, mutually constituting each other as part of a *whole*.

### Social Situation of Development

A key concept that Vygotsky presented in his unfinished work on child development, “The Problem of Age” (published in English for the first time in the *Collected Works*,

Vygotsky 1998) is the *social situation of development*. In his view, the social situation in which the child finds herself constitutes a *predicament*, a predicament from which the child can only emancipate herself by making a development. (An “Uh-oh!” moment, rather than an “Ah-ha!” moment, perhaps?)

The social situation is made up of the child’s adult carers and all the material conditions surrounding her. Self-evidently, this situation is a microcosm of the whole society, inasmuch as all the expectations, practices, customs, social conditions and so on of the larger society flow through any such group. Every child of course is in a different situation and no two are just alike; in understanding the social situation of development as a *Gestalt*, there is no implication that the situation is a whole in the sense of being self-sufficient, isolated or independent from the rest of the society or indeed the world.

There are two things which are important to grasp about this concept however. Firstly, it is only in and through the cultural and material conditions and the adults with whom the child interacts that the larger society penetrates the child’s life and development, and this social situation constitutes, with the child, a sovereign and viable form of life, within the norms acquired from the larger society.

Secondly, the ‘social situation of development’ is the concept through which the researcher grasps the dynamics of the child’s development. By grasping the situation as a predicament rather than simply as an inventory of attributes (number in family, sibling position, parents’ education and employment, etc., etc.), the researcher gains an insight into exactly *how* the social situation conditions the child’s development.

The child’s social situation of development is defined as a predicament because it is constituted as a kind of trap from which the child can only emancipate herself by a qualitative transformation of her own psychological structure and (what amounts to the same thing) the structure of her relationship with those who are providing for her needs. Development means transforming the mode of psychological functioning and transcending the social situation of development. Overcoming the barriers and developing the new formation constitutes an escape from the social situation of development. This self-emancipation is only possible if the child manifests a drive which transcends the limits of her situation; absent this drive, and there can be no development.

For any social group, reproduction of its culture and institutions down the generations is an imperative. Historical experience ensures that the norms to which a child is subject are to some degree rational with respect to the developmental capacities of a child of the given age, and all societies to some degree build age-level expectations into their institutional practices (Rogoff 2003), with the children of a society motivated to conform to these yardsticks. So the social situation of development is a product of these culturally and historically inherited expectations which the adults bring with them.

At the same time, the fact of development of infants into adult citizens can be made intelligible only by the fact that, beginning with birth itself, individuals strive to emancipate themselves from barriers to their self-determination, barriers which bar them from full participation within the horizons of their own expectations. Although this drive takes on uniquely human forms that are culturally constructed, it is reasonable to presume the existence of a drive of this kind even in a newborn child. That is to say, at *any* stage in development, the child will normally strive to overcome barriers which frustrates their control over their own conditions of existence insofar as they are capable of perceiving them.

In any given social situation of development, the child is required to behave in a certain way for which some psychological function is key. Once such a key psychological function has developed beyond a certain limit, the child finds that she has outgrown the social situation of development and the role she plays in that situation. This faces the child with a new kind of predicament: she does not yet have the capacity to adopt a different role, nor in fact can she even conceive of such a role, but she finds her present position a continual insult and offence. (Bozhovich 2004) The result is a period of crisis where by an exercise of will, at whatever stage of its development, the child refuses the role in the only way open to her and thereby creates conditions for a new social situation of development in which her needs can be met in a way, freed of the former constraint and free of the threats suffered during the transitional period of crisis, thus opening up a new period of stable development. The period of crisis is often conflictful for both the child and her carers; the child can have no clearly formed aim in its 'rebellion' against the confinement of her activity within oppressive bounds; her carers have to construct a new concept of the child and accommodate themselves and the child to a new set of relationships. If the adult carers fail to make an appropriate adjustment, then there may be a developmental pathology.

The child starts life with very little of what she needs to become a fully participating citizen of the society into which she has been born. Each of the *Gestalten* through which the child and her social situation passes constitutes a viable form of life, and at each step along the way different psychological functions develop in response to the social situation of development, building on what has been constructed in previous phases of development and each with different psychological functions playing a central role.

Through the concept of the social situation of development, in which the relations by which the child's needs are met are equally the bonds enslaving them, Vygotsky grasped the social life of the child as a *concept*, as a *Gestalt*. In just the same way Marx grasped capitalism as specific set of relations (wage labour and capital) characteristic of a definite social formation.

Vygotsky used the Russian word, *novo-obrazovaniye*<sup>4</sup>, usually translated as 'neoformation', to refer to a unique mode of socio-psychological functioning (memory, motor control, perception, etc.). He conceives of the entire social and psychological functioning of the child in terms of the numerous 'neoformations' which make up the *Gestalt*. Each neoformation has its own path of development, each interacting with the others, and undergoing qualitative changes at different stages in the child's development. The dynamics of development of the whole is understood through the distinct and interconnected development of the neoformations. What is important to understand however is that, with the child together with the social situation constituting a *Gestalt*, each *novo-obrazovaniye*, is simultaneously a *psychological* function and a mode of behaviour, embedded in the participation of a child in its social situation of development.

The child's mental and physical life entails numerous neoformations which are increasingly differentiated from one another and gain increasing independence from each

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<sup>4</sup> *Novo-obrazovaniye* is usually rendered as 'neoformation'. *novo-* means new; *obraz* means 'picture' (as does the German *Bild*) and *obrazovaniye* or 'picturing', is usually translated as 'education', but seems to have a similar meaning to the German *Bildung*. So according to its etymology, *novo-obrazovaniye* means a new 'accomplishment' or unique mode of social functioning.

other in the course of development and their development of a diversity of needs and modes of activity.

Paradigmatically, the social situation of development is unitary in the sense that it is made up of a group of individuals (the child's carers) who *collaborate* in the raising of the child, using shared artefacts such as language and resources the child needs, according to norms and practices characteristic of the social group of which they are a part. Although beginning as an organism which is only marginally social, the child quickly becomes an active part of the project into which they are being raised. Things are never as simple as this of course. All the adults participating in the child's upbringing have different expectations and hopes and bring different opportunities and pressures to bear on the child. As the child's horizons broaden, such as when the child attends school, the internal differentiation of the social situation of development will become extensive, but even in the very first moments that mother and father lay eyes on the infant, they react differently. So the social situation of development and the child's character is differentiated and internally contradictory from the very beginning.

The social situation of the child's development is one of a multitude of intersecting projects going on in the world. All of these activities, together with shared language(s), norms and customs, and so on, are transmitted into the child's experience and the development of their personality via the adults meeting the child's needs.

The general schema of development from newborn to adult is that the child begins life physically, biologically, psychologically, materially, socially and culturally dependent on their immediate system of support, and in that sense they are an undifferentiated and subordinate part of the *Gestalt* constituted by the social situation of development. Equally, the child's psychological structure and social interaction begins as an undifferentiated whole, and in passing through a series of *Gestalten*, undergoes a series of transformations in which a certain psychological function and mode of activity differentiates itself and gives rise to a new formation, a 'neoformation'. This process continues up to adulthood, when, if the process of development has been successfully completed, the person is now fully socialized and qualifies as a free agent operating within the norms of the culture, capable of a large number of distinct modes of activity. As the child's horizons expand, the *Gestalt* expands from the immediate family circle to the nation state. Only as a physically, biologically, psychologically, materially, socially and culturally *independent* citizen does she become a fully *integrated* member of the social group, whose consciousness constitutes and is constituted by the social practices of the whole. Internally, this process of socialization corresponds to the successive differentiation of psychological functions, and successive levels of emancipation, articulated within the individual's overall psychological structure or personality.

### Central Neoformations and Lines of Development

As noted above, each stable period of development takes place within a social situation of development, created by the child's forceful breaking of the former situation together with the carers' adjustment of their relationships with the child. According to Vygotsky, each period begins with a still immature central neoformation, made possible by the new social situation of development, but not yet fully differentiated and still bearing the hallmarks of the former relationships. Strengthening under the influence of activities enabled by the social situation, the central neoformation begins to reorganise other

psychological functions, which gradually realign themselves around the central neoformation in the leading developmental role. Subsequently, in the latter phase of an age period, the central neoformation begins to come into conflict with the social situation of development. Having opened up new possibilities, the central neoformation discloses possibilities beyond the confines of the social situation of development and a period of crisis begins.

The above process Vygotsky called the 'central line of development'. There are other, peripheral, lines of development unfolding at the same time which are secondary at this stage in that they do not contribute to the building up and resolution of the specific predicament which characterizes this period of development. In subsequent periods of development, the line of development which was at a certain stage central, continues, but is no longer central, and plays a peripheral role. Likewise, a line of development which was formerly in the background, may step forward into the central role.

So during the stable periods of development it is the gradual growth of the central neoformation which ultimately creates the predicament which forces the child to transform itself. During crisis periods on the other hand, it is the transformation of relationships and the mode of the child's activity which drives the changes in all the psychological functions and their rearrangement in a new structure.

### Development and Gestalt

Vygotsky was formulating a completely new vision of the structure of the human personality, a structure for which there were few satisfactory existing concepts, but there can be no doubt that he drew on Marx's conception of the forms of movement of social formations. Marx remarked:

"There is in every social formation a particular branch of production which determines the position and importance of all the others, and the relations obtaining in this branch accordingly determine the relations of all other branches as well. It is as though light of a particular hue were cast upon everything, tingeing all other colours and modifying their specific features." (Marx 1986: 43)

It was this same conception of the development of a complex whole or *Gestalt* which characterised Vygotsky's conception of personality and a person's relation to their social situation. Just as Marx and Hegel had conceived of history in terms of periods of gradual change punctuated by periods of crisis and transformation, Vygotsky conceived of child development in the same way. Talking of these developmental crises, Vygotsky noted:

"The age levels represent the integral, dynamic formation, the structure, which defines the role and relative significance of each partial line of development. At each given age period, development occurs in such a way that separate aspects of the child's personality change and as a result of this, there is a reconstruction of the personality as a whole – in development (i.e., the critical periods) there is just exactly a reverse dependence: the child's personality changes as a whole in its internal structure and the movement of each of its parts is determined by the laws of change of this whole." (Vygotsky 1998: 196)

In the early phase of stable periods of development, development consists in consolidating the immature central neoformation characteristic of this period; in the later

phase, development consists in preparing the child for a new social situation transcending the bounds of the central neoformation. During critical periods, development consists in facilitating a total rearrangement of the relationships and modes of activity under conditions when the child is not yet ready but is nonetheless striving to break through.

### Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky understands the child's psychological functioning as a *Gestalt* which (1) includes both the internal life of the child and their behaviour in interaction with those around them, and (2) passes through a series of qualitatively distinct phases, in each of which the child occupies a distinct social position and exhibits a structurally distinct mode of behaviour, separated by critical periods of more or less rapid change.

From this standpoint, Vygotsky's well-known concept of the 'zone of proximal development' takes on very clear outlines. Its significance for Vygotsky is exclusively in terms of development, that is to say, in relation to how the activities in which the child may be engaged contribute to preparing and resolving the 'predicament' which defines the child's phase of development. All other learning is secondary in relation to development. Further, the intervention of the adults in the child's social situation is indispensable since the child cannot interact with a vacuum. Transformation of the child's mode of behaviour entails the adults acting in relation to the child in a way to which the child is not yet fully capable of responding, because it entails acting as if the child had already completed the passage to a new stable phase of development. The adults' behaviour then will not be simply reactive but is directed towards the adults' cultural expectations of the child's development.

On the other side, the child may respond according to the characteristics of the next and higher stage of their development, with the adults' assistance, and there can be no doubt that such a 'rehearsal' of behaviour of a new and higher mode, prepares the child for abandoning their former identity and taking on the new mode of behaviour.

But this relation is only relevant to development if the activity in which the child is being coached corresponds to the leading neoformation for their 'age level'. Otherwise, they may learn, but such learning will not contribute to their development, will not contribute to the child emancipating themselves from the social position in which they have hitherto been located so as to enter a new phase of development, a new mode of interaction and a new social situation of development.

### Conclusion

Just as Goethe's scientific ideas have been generally dismissed as quaint and misconceived, and the influence of these ideas on Hegel and Marx overlooked, so has the significance of this current of thought leading from Goethe via Hegel and Marx to Vygotsky been overlooked and misunderstood. The understanding of Gestalt which can be recovered from these writers may offer a new and powerful insight into Vygotsky's understanding of development and a re-examination of his most well-known ideas in the light of this insight, and a profoundly new approach to the relation between the various human sciences.

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