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Part III. The Psychology of the Will

3. The development of the Will through adulthood

Introduction

I take ‘adulthood’ to refer to those ages after leaving secondary school when a person has entered training or further education or is in a job or looking for work, up until the time when mental and physical decline predominates.

Although it was Vygotsky who devised the basic principle of development of the Will in adulthood, he did not live long enough to develop it. Consequently, I draw also on the work of Vygotsky’s younger collaborator, A.N. Leontyev, and the work of Leontyev’s student, Fedor Vasilyuk, before he abandoned Marxism for Orthodox Christianity.

The crises of adult life which shape the Will and the entire personality of an adult are associated with rites of passage, career changes, marriage and divorce, deaths in the family, commitment to new life-projects and in turn the conflicts and blockages such life-projects, encounter, and so on. While no life is lived without such crises, each life story is unique.

These experiences differ from those which arise the course of child development chiefly because here the person is fully developed psychologically, whereas in the case of a child, the subject is as yet only partially developed psychologically. The adult does not face a series of more or less predetermined hurdles to reach their goals; they more or less voluntarily set their own life-goals and are responsible for dealing with what comes their way as a result, even if tragedy or good luck may shape their life more than their own decisions.

This chapter ventures into the territory of *social theory* but remains concerned centrally with the psychology of the Will. In order to develop a theory of the Will in the domain of social theory it will be necessary to conduct an *immanent critique* of the existing theories of Sociology. That is not my focus yet, but will be dealt with in the next section. Nonetheless, this chapter can be taken as a kind of ‘hinge’ linking the two domains.

Whereas I have learnt at Vygotsky’s feet insofar as I have learnt something about the development of the Will in childhood, my appropriation of the work of A.N. Leontyev is qualified. Nonetheless, his formulation of a theory of the personality applicable to adult life makes the starting point of my enquiry.

Leontyev’s Theory of the Personality

A.N. Leontyev was Vygotsky’s youngest collaborator, although Vygotsky broke relations with him before his death. Leontyev went on to found the current of Psychology known as Activity Theory. Leontyev managed to survive the Stalinist purges and was Dean of the Faculty of Psychology at the Moscow State University at the time of his death in 1979.

‘Personality’ is a complex and chameleon concept – which attributes of an individual are to be counted under the heading of ‘personality’ and which not? A.N. Leontyev relegated to the category of ‘substructures’ of the personality

“such various traits as, for example, moral qualities, knowledge, habits and customs, forms of psychological reflection, and temperament” (1978, p. 154). What he sees as composing the structure of a personality are units that he called ‘motives’, and it is these motives which both express and give meaning to a person’s life, or more generally form the *structure of meaning* for the person. What is more usually understood as ‘personality’ nowadays more closely approximates what Leontyev calls ‘forms of psychological reflection’, but as I hope to show it is precisely the structure of meaning more or less as understood by Leontyev which is of importance in connection with understanding the development of the Will and the framing of a social theory, even if it is only partially explanatory in the domain of Psychology.

The Russian word normally translated as ‘personality’ in this discourse is *lichnost* (личность). This word is probably best translated as *persona*, inasmuch as it refers to the ‘face’ a person shows to the world, as opposed to what A.N. Leontyev rather dismissively called ‘substructures’ of the personality “such various traits as, for example, moral qualities, knowledge, habits and customs, forms of psychological reflection, and temperament” (1978, p. 154).

I do not define personality in the terms Leontyev proposed, but for the purpose of a study of the Will it is quite satisfactory to take ‘personality’ in the sense of ‘persona’ or *lichnost*. I do accept that there are psychological features relating to how a subject processes reality which are already more or less fixed by the end of childhood. A shy child tends to become a shy adult, but the adult *learns* how to cope with their shyness and may go on to become an entertainer or politician notwithstanding their shyness. But alas little has been bequeathed us by Soviet Psychology as to how these ‘substructures’ of the personality are formed in childhood. However, they do not bear on the subject matter of this work. The shy person who does not speak up in a meeting can learn to ‘put on a face’ and adopt the persona of a person who speaks up in meetings and have their voice heard. And how they do this is no different from any other issue in the psychological development of the adult.

As Leontyev saw it, during the first phase of development of a personality the child or youth is mostly just an expression of the class fraction and cultural group in which they have been raised (remembering the limited scope of personal attributes that Leontyev has in mind).

The subject’s belonging to a class conditions even at the outset the development of his connections with the surrounding world, a greater or smaller segment of his practical activity, his contacts, his knowledge, and his acquiring norms of behaviour. All of these are acquisitions from which personality is made up at the stage of its initial formation.

1978, pp. 178-9

Leontyev says that at this stage it cannot properly be said that there is a personality because the person is merely an object of their social group:

later this situation is turned around, and they become a *subject* of their social group, unconsciously and then consciously, ... decisive or vacillating ... at every turn of his life’s way he must free himself

of something, confirm something in himself, and he must do all this and not simply 'submit to the effect of the environment',

1978, p. 179

What were formerly the traits of a person of their kind become later merely the *conditions* for the formation of a personality properly so called. The subject gradually frees themselves from their biography, discarding some aspects of their 'indigenous' personality while consciously developing others.

Personality thus no longer seems to be the result of a direct layering of external influences; it appears as something that man makes of himself, confirming his human life. He confirms it in everyday affairs and contacts, as well as in people to whom he gives some part of himself on the barricades of class struggles, as well as on the fields of battle for his country, and at times he consciously confirms it even at the price of his physical life.

1978, p. 185

A person's motivation is represented to the person in the shape of the activities to which they are committed, so to the extent that the subject actively commits themselves to an activity, acquiring in the meantime the knowledge and skills, the norms and all the attributes associated with that activity, these motives, represented by the object of the activity, become a stable part of the person's personality. The activities themselves wax and wane, prove successful or fail – their fate depending on factors in the wider social world. The personality however constitutes a stable base in the inner world of the subject. Development of the personality is tied up with the development of the subject's Will and the subject's emotional life is linked to the fate of these activities, but the personality remains a relatively stable psychic formation, according to Leontyev.

In the next logico-historical phase of development, the subject arranges the units of their personality into a *structure*. The units of this structure are the 'motives', so this life-world could also be called a 'motivational structure'. Some motives make their way to the top of a hierarchy, dominating and leading others which become conditional upon it. Sometimes, the personality becomes split with some motivations dominant in some situations while others predominate in other situations. There will also be conflict between motives and development of the personality which entails resolution of these internal conflicts, either sublating a motivational conflict into more profound motives which transcend the conflict, or by relegating or discarding one motivation.

Although Leontyev claims a 'stable psychic formation' for the personality, it is surely self-evident that, if seen this way, the personality itself is subject to the fate of the various activities which are the basis for a person's motives.

The final phase of the development of a personality is entailed in the raising of motivations from the material needs tied up in maintaining their life in their social group up to more abstract motivations and ultimately, following Aristotle, "the good life for humanity" becoming the leading motive, conditioning and leading other motivations in the subject's life and personality. This rosy opinion of the senior citizen is not necessarily shared, but this was Leontyev's view.

In the earliest stages of personality development, development is driven by *need*, according to Leontyev. Needs develop of course and never remain at the animal

level, but in conditions where motivations are driven by needs the person is an object for their environment. “Personality cannot develop within the framework of need; its development necessarily presupposes a displacement of needs by creation, which alone does not know limits” (1978, p. 186). Once the subject begins to free themselves from subordination to the needs and norms of their social group, and their personality is composed of ideal social motives, Leontyev increasingly refers to the motives as *otnosheniya* (отношение, pl. отношения) rather than motives (мотивов). ‘отношения’ is usually translated as ‘relations’, but it is also used to mean ‘priorities’ or ‘attitudes’ or ‘orientations’. I will translate this word as ‘commitments’.

... the personality of man also ‘is produced’ – it is created by the *otnosheniya*, into which the individual enters in his activity.
1978, p. 152

I will examine the word *otnosheniye* in more detail presently.

These priorities or relations are the commitments the person makes to activities, and which take up more or less leading positions in the structure of their motives. What is indicated is an ideal motive, which I would prefer to call a ‘life-project’ inasmuch as in the fully developed personality it does not represent a ‘need’ so much as a ‘quasi-need’, a commitment to an ideal of some kind.

Leontyev notes a pathology of the personality found in “superprosperous consumer society” when the intrinsic value of objects as means of satisfaction of needs has been lost and commodities perform only the function of confirming a person’s prestige. In such a situation the personality may take on a “configuration of flatness devoid of real summits when what is small in life man takes for something large, and the large things he does not see at all” (1978, p. 183).

Although Leontyev correctly emphasises the subjective side in the formation of personality, his theory lacks a satisfactory explanation of how the subject comes to adopt motives and discards others in the early formation of the personality or how and why a person might change their life-world. It seems to me that the concept used by Vygotsky and later by Fedor Vasilyuk, *perezhivaniya* (переживания) – deeply-felt or possibly life-changing crises in a person’s life and a person’s response to them – has more explanatory power. In the course of a political conflict against Vygotsky, Leontyev denounced the use of this concept, and it was only restored to its central place later, by Vasilyuk.

Leontyev’s Activity Theory remains a powerful and complex approach to the psychology of the personality, especially if it is used in conjunction with Vygotsky’s Cultural Psychology. It has been subject to at least two generations of development since Leontyev’s day, and most of its shortcomings may be overcome. In the above, I have focussed on Leontyev’s theory of the personality, and passed over his treatment of how the interaction of ideology associated with a person’s social position and their personal experiences together shape the *sense* each activity to which they are committed has for them.

Vasilyuk’s Theory of Personal Crises

Fedor Vasilyuk was a postgraduate student at the Faculty of Psychology of Moscow State University when he wrote his PhD thesis later published as “The

Psychology of *Perezhivanie*” (1984). Vasilyuk became the Chair of Individual and Group Psychotherapy of Moscow State University of Psychology and Education.

As Vasilyuk saw it, a patient comes to a psychotherapist because they faced some *impossible situation*. (See Blunden 2015). Basing himself broadly on Leontyev’s theory of the personality, Vasilyuk saw such impossible situations as resulting from one of four types of dilemma arising from the fate of the life-projects to which the patient was committed. The set of life-projects to which a person is committed constitutes their ‘life-world’. These life-projects are selected from among those activities existing in the society and arranged in the structure of the person’s *lichnost*, personality.

He defines a *difficult* life-world in which a person’s life-project is blocked in some way, and a *complex* life-world in which a person finds life-projects in conflict with one another. The easy/difficult and simple/complex dichotomies provide him with a four-part taxonomy of archetypal crises. In each case, the relevant commitments have to be identified and the subject must engage in a *perezhivanie* – understood as the cognitive and emotional labour required to re-orient their commitments so as to resolve the impossible situation. In each case a particular kind of work has to be done and a particular virtue developed according to the type of life-world the patient must restructure.

Vasilyuk was a Psychotherapist, however, concerned with how people survive those ‘impossible situations’. That is, his concerns were with the Counsellor, whose task was to help the patient *survive* when their Will could not resolve the situation which was, by definition, impossible.

Despite what the change managers like to tell us, there is a significant difference between your situation when your partner dies and when the boss makes your job redundant or the government cuts your pension.

The concern of this work however is the psychological issues which arise when the aim is to not just to survive but to *transform the apparently impossible situation*. Granted, a life-partner who has died cannot be brought back to life, but there are many other apparently impossible situations which *can* be resolved. This is what people are talking about when they speak of ‘having agency’. I will remain however within the discourse of the *Will* because we can benefit from the long history of the study of the Will which I have reviewed above.

Otnosheniye

Etymologically, *otnosheniye* means ‘to carry from’, and the dictionary says that *otnosheniye* can be translated as ‘attitude’, ‘relationship’, ‘connection’, ‘how someone feels about someone or their connection to someone’ and can refer to diplomatic ties. It is a relational word, expressing a person’s relation to something else, but what? Alex Kozulin, a Russian-speaking Vygotsky scholar reviewed Vasilyuk’s book in 1991 and referred to *otnoshiniya* as ‘life-projects’. Vasilyuk’s teacher, A.N. Leontyev used *otnosheniye* in a similar sense, in which what is being connected to is some *activity*. An activity, in Activity Theory, is a very general concept.

Activities are the units of Activity Theory; everything is an activity in one sense or another. Activities are usually named according to their object, that is to say, the ideal form of the object being acted upon (See Blunden 2023).

I find that *otnosheniye* in the sense used by Leontyev and Vasilyuk can be adequately translated as ‘commitment’. Commitments are to some really-existing project or activity to which a subject is committed. So it satisfies Vygotsky’s demand for a unit, that it contains moments of both the environment and consciousness. The commitment could be to the subject’s job, their family or their country; it could be Socialism, honesty, prosperity, Hegel, the subject’s home town or Donald Trump. Whatever a person is committed to and functions as a unit of the motivational structure of their personality. So for example even something as diffuse as ‘honesty’ I do not conceive of as a ‘value’, but rather, alongside Feminism, Social Democracy, Science and Christianity, and so on, as a *really existing aggregate of actions* in the real world in which the subject lives, all directed at, working on or embodying that common ideal.

With all the above caveats, I embrace Vasilyuk’s conception of a person’s ‘life-world’ as the structure of all those activities represented in the subject as the structure of their commitments.

the object of analysis is the ‘lifeworld’. This has external and internal aspects, denoted ... as ‘external world’ and ‘internal world’. The external world can be either easy or difficult. The internal world can be either simple or complex.

Vasilyuk, 1984, p. 92

Thus a person’s fate is tied up with the fate of the projects to which they are committed. Exactly *how* it affects the subject depends on the project’s position in the structure of the personality; how it affects the rest of the community depends on the place of the project in the totality of all those projects which make up the activity constituting the community to which the subject belongs.

Perezhivanie

Augustine of Hippo invented the word, Will, to be able to name the personal crisis he faced, his inability to choose between two courses of action to each of which he was committed in different ways. Likewise, even though the Will is active in every action we take, we can best make sense of the Will when we are considering such *crises*, Vasilyuk’s ‘impossible situations’.

Perezhivanie is a common word in the Russian language (See Blunden 2016); it simply means ‘an experience’. But the term in Russian differs from the English because (1) it carries a connotation of *suffering*, (2) it is active, not so much something that happened to you as how you dealt with a difficult situation and (3) it is inclusive of the catharsis, that is, the way you changed your personality as a result of surviving. Etymologically, in fact, *pere-zhivan-ie* means *sur-viv-ing*. Russian speakers can, however, use the word in an everyday way just as we use the word ‘experiences’. However, *perezhivanie* does differ from the Russian word, *opit*, which is like ‘experience’ in the expression ‘work experience’ when you’re filling out your CV.

So *perezhivaniya* are like the chapters of your autobiography – the critical situations you've faced and how you survived them and made yourself the kind of person you are today.

Vasilyuk's work is entirely about the mental labour of, for example, taking up a new project in lieu of the project which has come to an end, such as launching a charity in the name of the loved one who has died. Or, when two life-projects come into conflict with one another, re-evaluating your commitment to one or the other. And so on.

The issue for us is different however. Rather than just changing our relation to the world, adapting to the difficult and complex reality, the question is, in general, how can you change that reality?

Changing Reality

As Vygotsky said: there is no such thing as an unmotivated action.

The context here is that the 'motive' is some really-existing life-project. Doubtless, every emancipatory action is always also a transgression, always violates social norms. But it invariably also mobilises social norms, 'taps into' dispositions which already existed.

I can simply illustrate this idea which I will elaborate much later with the following report:

When Rhea Liang and her colleagues (2019) enquired into why so many well-qualified female trainee surgeons abandon the discipline before completing training, [they] used professional networks to recruit research subjects who had already chosen to leave surgery and these subjects helped recruit others and also participated in analysing the data; they were participant observers. The inclusion of research subjects in the research team itself was possible because the researchers approached the topic with a feminist perspective consistent with aims of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) to identify and break down barriers to female participation in the professions.

Blunden, 2023

In other words, Liang et al drew on a life-project existing in the community, existing professional networks, the Women's Liberation Movement, or simply, Feminism, to recruit colleagues, plus the well-established scientific journal, *The Lancet*, to prosecute their attack on the domination of patriarchy in Surgery.

I will leave this line of enquiry at this point and turn to Sociology, which has developed quite independently of Psychology, Soviet or otherwise. In the meantime, however, I shall review another investigation which will be relevant to a lot of people in today's world where every career entails protracted university or other professional training before even entering the workplace.

The trainee dilemma

A critical phase in the development of the Will in young adulthood is the 'trainee dilemma' (See Anakin et al, in press). This dilemma marks the transition from a formally qualified to an actually capable professional. For those of us who have had to endure years of university training for a profession, we are often required

to undergo many years of on-the-job training before we had any say over the conditions of our working life.

The development of professional competence extends beyond formal education to include development of a new professional identity shaped by workplace experiences and interactions with senior colleagues. Formal education cannot fully equip trainees for the practical demands of professional life. The workplace introduces new stimuli originating in the working environment that require the integration of scientific and everyday concepts through experiential learning and social interaction.

Perezhivaniya, transformative experiences are integrated into the trainee's personality, reshaping their professional identity through challenging events and interactions. Measured support systems, such as mentorship and authentic tasks involving risk, foster the trainee's development while providing safety nets to mitigate failures. Becoming a competent, confident, and committed professional is a transformative journey that not only enhances practical skills but also aligns the trainee's professional and personal identities.

Nowadays, an increasing proportion of people complete an extensive program of post-secondary education to qualify for a profession. Even occupations not formerly recognised as professions, such as early childhood education, now require formal education. Becoming a professional is an important life-stage. But being qualified in a profession does not mean a person is capable to act as a professional.

This gap is the *trainee dilemma*: qualified but not yet capable, as important and difficult as any other transitional stage of personal development.

Successfully completing formal educational tasks is a different kind of activity than diagnosing and treating a patient or teaching a child multiplication. Being a professional is a different kind of activity and requires a different kind of person. Becoming a professional requires a development of the *whole* person, not just acquiring additional skills. The transition requires a restructuring of the personality, so that the person responds appropriately to stimuli originating from the workplace situation.

For the trainee (as for the child) of critical importance is *measured* support by the people working around them. Support is *measured* when people provide neither too much nor too little guidance, advice, coaching, or mentorship. However, the trainee is an adult, not a child, and is responsible for their own actions.

Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria demonstrated that human beings control their future behaviour 'from outside', so to speak, by creating relevant links in advance of the situation actually arising. This insight leads to a theory of the development of the personality which emphasises the person's relations to the world (*otnosheniya*) rather than traits, such as temperament or introversion. In this view, the trainee's fellow workers play an important role in modelling, guiding, supporting, and supervising the trainee. Off-site training can do only so much.

There are two interrelated aspects to becoming a professional. Firstly, a person must be able to access the formal knowledge, acquired by institutions over centuries and apply this knowledge appropriately in the work situation.

Secondly, others must give recognition to the person that they are capable. Only when both are true can the person say: “Yes, I’m a professional.”

Vygotsky’s well-known distinction between ‘scientific’ and ‘everyday’ concepts is important here. ‘Scientific’ concepts are first acquired via instruction in an institutional setting and in a formal learning context such as by reading books or listening to lectures. While such concepts *develop* by becoming more concrete by connecting with other scientific concepts as part of some *system* of concepts, but initially, they are only *formal* in the sense they that have no direct relation to personal experience.

‘Everyday’ concepts, on the other hand, are acquired in everyday interaction with other people and the cultural artefacts of a community. Everyday concepts are constituted from *life experience*. If the scientific concept remains as it is, without merging with personal experiences, then it remains merely empty words. Conversely, if the everyday concept remains unschooled in the historically acquired knowledge of the relevant culture, then it cannot rise to the demands made on an experienced professional.

Central to the personality will be a commitment to the profession itself. Passage through the trainee dilemma is not a gradual process. It is made up of a series of discrete and relatively minor *perezhvaniya*. It is through many *perezhvaniya* that the trainee builds the concrete ideal of what it means to be a capable doctor or teacher. These *perezhvaniya* are experienced each time the trainee confronts an unfamiliar situation and either succeeds or fails. Failure and success in these *perezhvaniya* and especially how they cope with these crises have a cumulative effect on the trainee; they shape their personality and how they view their profession.

Initially, the trainee’s *otnosheniya* include their commitment to their ideal of their chosen profession. This conception will at first be abstract, perhaps the image of one good teacher that inspired them or a general understanding of the word ‘medicine’. Later, all the little *perezhvaniya* – minor embarrassments, traumatic mistakes, exhilarating achievements, successful interventions by others – will fill out and colour the ideal the trainee has of their profession. Their concept of the profession will be a *concrete ideal*, that is, an ideal which has been enriched with nuances and connections due to experience.

A qualified trainee will not automatically become a capable professional. The trainee may experience traumatic failure and become a capable professional only after experiencing humiliations, embarrassment, burnout, and possibly even causing injury to others. Such *perezhvaniya* may disfigure their professional abilities and identity. To avoid such negative outcomes, newly qualified professionals need assistance from senior colleagues. This assistance might include mentorship and coaching. But support must include authentic tasks with real people that include a risk of failure but failing safely so that no one is injured. Passively observing someone doing the task correctly is insufficient because the trainee must learn to master their own actions in the midst of the relevant stimuli.

Failure is an integral part of professional development. Rather than avoiding failure, it should be moderated and embraced as a valuable learning opportunity. Trainees need to engage in authentic tasks that carry a risk of failure but allow

them to fail safely without harming a patient or person. Rather than fail-safe tasks, the 'safe-fail' task is one which can tolerate risk while providing opportunities for trainees to learn from their mistakes. The safe-fail task can help trainees learn from their negative *perezhivaniya* by reflecting on and adjusting their subsequent practices.

The riskiness of tasks in the workplace is an essential character of a profession. Simulation exercises help prepare the student for work situations but cannot replace the *perezhivanie* of completing a task in which such risks are successfully negotiated. We describe the tasks in which a trainee either fails or succeeds despite the difficulty and risks as a *perezhivanie*. It is only through such *perezhivaniya* that personal development takes place.

When undergoing formal training for a profession a student learns rules such as 'when I see this, then I do that'. It is through such action-rules that the Will is trained so that the trainee responds to stimuli automatically with the appropriate action. This is what Vygotsky called 'closure' as discussed earlier. These action-rules are located within a scientific conceptual structure, but concepts always have a *motive* at their heart which can be realised only insofar as the person is able to recognise the appropriate stimuli and respond with the appropriate action.

The *actual* concept which the seasoned professional has mastered, merges both paths of development, both scientific and everyday concepts. It is this merging of everyday and scientific knowledge that is the trainee's experience. A trainee who lacks sound everyday interpersonal abilities and is unable to *read the situation* when they meet a pupil, patient, or client is unlikely to become a good professional even if they have a good foundation in formal scientific knowledge.

The stimuli which have been acquired in a formal setting are not present in the work situation. The subject's formal knowledge must be worked over and new stimuli acquired in the only way possible; while acting in their professional capacity with real patients, real clients, or in real classrooms. In this way, a new mode of action is constructed alongside the existing formal mode of action acquired in the university setting – professional action in the workplace.

When a person decides to study and takes up a job in that profession, their ideal of that profession takes up a leading position in the structure of their personality, at least while they are at work. As such, it functions as the key component of their identity. That initial ideal may be a thin abstraction based on the image of a family member or fictional character. It will also be a highly conditional ideal because the person is not yet able to say, "I am a professional." The question is: how does their personality develop to the point when they are able to say, "I am a professional" and all those around them affirm that claim, and they survive the 'trainee dilemma'?

The process of development of the personality takes place through a series of *perezhivaniya* in which the person forms new relationships to their environment (*otnosheniya*) or 'commitments'. In the professions, there are two distinct references: the person's own perception of their performance, and the actions of others signalling their assessment of the person in the profession. Both the self-perception and that of others must affirm the person's identity as a trained professional for the trainee identity as a professional to be established.

Inevitably, the trainee will make mistakes. While signalling to self and others that the trainee is not yet a professional, failures do not necessarily damage the trainee's identity. It may act as a spur to learn and do better, but most importantly by experiencing the failed action the trainee is enabled to recognise and overcome that failure in the future. The active supervision and corrective action by more senior professionals in this instance are vital.

The trainee dilemma is a critical phase in professional development, marked by a transition from formal education to practical competence. It entails the transformation of the trainee's entire personality rather than mere skill acquisition. Through their interactions with more experienced colleagues and authentic workplace challenges, trainees engage in a dynamic interplay of support and independence that fosters their development. This journey is punctuated by *perezhivaniya*, intense transformative experiences that integrate personal and professional growth

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