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Part III. Vygotsky on the Psychology of the Will

2. The development of the Will through childhood

Introduction

I have already outlined how the Will is constituted within the psychology of an individual person, but I have yet to explain *how* a new-born, barely manifesting even a coherent natural will, becomes an adult citizen who can raise a family, earn a living, vote, make war, etc. This chapter remains within the *psychology* of the Will, outlining just *how* the Will becomes as free as it can within the domain of psychology. It will become clear how Vygotsky's Psychology is inherently interdisciplinary and will set us up to approach the problem of the collective Will on solid, scientific ground in the next section.

The development of the Will in ontogeny has to be understood across two different domains, childhood and adulthood.

Childhood

Throughout childhood, the Will passes through a series of six crises demarking six different age periods, and only at the end of this passage do we find an adult whose personality is fully formed such that they can enjoy all the rights of citizenship. The accomplishment of the phase of development preceding each crisis is distinctive and sets the scene for the critical phase which brings it to an end with the passage to a new period of development. Each of these phases of crisis is characterised by Vygotsky as a *qualitative leap forward in the development of the Will*. Consequently, I will focus this narrative on the phases of crisis, and leave consideration of the phases of gradual adaptation between crises for another day. My business here is just the Will.

One of the benefits of examining each of the distinct phases of development of the Will is that the narrative form provides an *analysis* of the Will into its essential components as its components are built one element at a time. None of the accomplishments of childhood are absolutely irreversible, and the fate of the Will in adulthood will manifest the nature of the successive crises of childhood.

Vygotsky notes in relation to one of the critical phases, but the same caution applies *mutatis mutandis* to all the crises:

Facts show that in other conditions of rearing, the crisis occurs differently. In children who go from nursery school to kindergarten, the crisis occurs differently than it does in children who go into kindergarten from the family. However, this crisis occurs in all normally proceeding child development.

Vygotsky, p. 295

Adulthood

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, my views on this domain 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.

Apart from the last years of life, dominated by mental, physical and social decline, the crises of adult life which shape the adult's Will and the entire personality are associated with rites of passage, career changes, marriage and divorce, deaths in the family, conflicts and blockages in life-projects, and so on. While no life is lived without such crises, and each life story is unique.

In relation to adulthood, I will present the principles which underlie the development of the Will later on.

The six crises of child development

The crises dealt with below are named according to the age Vygotsky assigned to each crisis on the basis of his experience with children in the young Soviet Republic. There is no suggestion whatsoever that the crises happen to all children or in all cultures at the same age. As cited above, however, all these crises must be experienced by children who successfully make it to adulthood and the freedoms that come with that. But they will happen differently, and the different way the crises are experienced will mark the personality of the adult. I will not touch on issue specific to neurodiversity or people with disabilities.

One of the ways in which an age-period is identified is that the general population has a word indicating a child currently in a particular period of development. This not only verifies that the period is *real* and not a figment of the researcher's imagination, but it also fixes the expectations on a child of this age and directs adults as to what expect and how to respond to the child.

Further, every culture has fixed ages for admission to the various institutions for the care and education of children, the nursery, kindergarten, primary school, secondary school and university. These more or less fixed ages both indicate the stage of development expected of a child of the given age in a given nation and function as a factor determining the pace of psychological development.

Each stage of child development is marked by a particular mode of freedom or independence of the Will from the Will of the parent.

Social Situation of Development

The key concept in the dynamics of each period in a child's life is the unique "social situation of development" which drives development and is characteristic of that period. In Vygotsky's words:

... at the beginning of each age period, there develops a completely original, exclusive, single, and unique relation, specific to the given age, between the child and reality, mainly the social reality, that surrounds him. We call this relation the *social situation of development* at the given age. The social situation of development represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period. It determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the basic source of development, the path

along which the social becomes the individual.
op. cit. p. 198

Vygotsky conceives of the social environment in which the child finds itself and the relationship of the child to other people, not just as a collection of factors, as influence or resource or context or community, but concretely as a *predicament*. This is the meaning of the word “situation.”

At each successive stage in the child’s development the child becomes able to perceive that the very situation through which their vital needs are being met, has *ensnared* them in a trap from which the child can only *emancipate* herself by *striving* in a way that *stretches* the capacities that they have at the given stage of development. In the case of a stable phase of development, this striving brings specific aspects of the child’s development in that phase to maturity and makes the social situation of development redundant, bringing into being a new predicament. Spoon-feeding a child is not only redundant but insulting once the child can feed itself. A qualitative development of the Will is required for the child to escape this situation and establish a new relationship to their social environment.

In each phase of crisis, with its striving the child forcibly breaks from the predicament and opens the way directly to a new phase of stable development in a new mode of behaviour and interaction, a new personality. This is why Vygotsky calls the situation a social situation of *development*, because all the factors which drive development are the result of this situation. There are many situations in life, but not all of them cause what could rightly be called ‘development’.

The predicament is generated by the child’s development which begins to outstrip the way the child’s needs are being met by the adults caring for the child. The expectations of the adults both produce and respond to the behaviour the child has exhibited hitherto, but at a certain point they find themselves out of step with the child’s development.

The mode of activity through which the child’s needs are being met is created in response, on one side, to the expectations the adults have of the child according to the resources and norms they have acquired from the culture, and on the other side, to the child’s behaviour and age, according to the child’s own capacities. Numerical age may be a factor irrespective of the child’s actual level of functioning, simply because institutional norms impose age level expectations on the child.

These expectations lock the child into those modes of activity which they are capable of sensing at that age. At one point the child perceives these relations as a mark of respect and security as well as a necessary degree of freedom, but at another point as a limitation. The child even comes to see the adults’ behaviour as a kind of insult, the transcendence of which becomes a need and a drive in its own right. However, the child is not yet *capable* of transcending that limitation, and their efforts to do so are frustrated. With their Will blocked the child will begin to display ‘difficulty’.

During each age period a specific ‘neof ormation’ begins its development and the fostering of this neof ormation determines every other relation during that period. Having reached a certain level of maturity, the central neof ormation

continues to develop throughout life, but is no longer leading the process of development. Rather, its development becomes a subordinate factor in the development of the whole child driven by the neoformation of the given age.

As the child develops within the social situation of development a contradiction develops. Whereas the child's needs have been satisfied up till now through the existing social situation, but due to the child's gradual development, the child becomes aware of new needs. These new needs presuppose the child occupying a new role, with its needs being met differently, and a corresponding change in the social situation. An infant may be quite happy having its mouth stuffed with food ... up to a point, but they soon feel the need to have a say over what is put in their mouth. That is to say, their Will has developed to a point such that it is being frustrated through lack of recognition. A need is being met in the situation, but the child is unable to determine that need. They need to disrupt the situation in which absolutely everything is done for them.

The structure of the crisis of the Will

This ability to perceive new needs does not yet mean that the child is able to satisfy them, both because they do not yet have the ability and because the adult carers do not treat them as a child who has that ability. They are stuck in this situation which they have begun to see as a restriction, even though it is the very situation in which their needs have been met. For example, a child might be angry and wants to defy their mother, but at the moment, because they simply can't overcome their own inclination, their mother finds it easy to manipulate them, like putting a piece of cheese in the mousetrap. In this circumstance the child may become defiant and refuse to do *anything*, so as to free themselves from manipulation by their mother by developing their own Will and letting their mother know that they have a mind of their own. The child is difficult because it is getting 'too big for its boots'.

At this point, it is the striving of the Will to take on a new role and change the situation which is what actualises development, which turns potential into reality. The situation as a whole determines the place of every part. During the phase of gradual development, the requirements of one part, the neoformation, determined the character of the whole psychology of the child. But in the critical phase, the whole – the crisis – determines the fate and role of every part of the child's psychology.

In the critical phase, the development can only be actualised if the adult carers perceive the child's new needs and respond by entering into the new mode of interaction with the child and fostering the emergent new capacity. The child perceives the situation as a constraint and strives to overcome it, and thus by implication, the overcoming of these constraints which fall within the child's capacity to perceive, is also a key *need* of the child, a drive which is not facilitated, but *frustrated* by the social situation which created it. If the child does not feel a need to overcome these constraints on the determination and satisfaction of their newly-perceived needs, or does not strive to overcome these constraints and emancipate itself, then a pathological situation exists and the child will not develop. For example, a young teenager who never feels any need to criticise the views and ways of the own family and their teachers will never fully develop as an adult citizen and take their own position in society.

Notice that the child must become aware, at whatever level it is sensible to speak of a child of the given age being aware, of the limitations of their present position; that is, they must in some way be able to sense a different role for themselves. The conditions for becoming aware of such a role are created by the current social situation of development, but there are always limitations on the ability of a child to see what could be but is not yet.

Once the parents have given way to the child's Will and taken away the play pen, or whatever, the parents' fears are immediately confirmed. The child has forcefully been demanding the right to walk around the room like everyone else, but never having had the opportunity to walk more than a meter without adult support. Now the child stumbles and falls, repeatedly. This is the second phase of the crisis period; the child has won the argument but they are not yet competent. They have a terrible time in the school playground, crash the family car or get mixed up with the wrong people, or whatever. They get through this period, but most likely not without pain.

Vygotsky characterised each crisis phase by the particular development of the Will which is accomplished in the given crisis. Very often, the nature of the crisis is well-known to parents because the crisis phases are almost always marked by *difficulty*.

The critical phases of development are distinguished by the fact that they are *transitional*; the difficult behaviour which characterises a given critical period fades away as soon as the relevant development in the Will has been achieved, but will return if the development is later threatened. Having overthrown the old regime, the child's difficult behaviour fades away. This contrasts with the accomplishments of the phases of stable development each of which creates a stable base for the next periods of development, while the neof ormation which characterised it, far from fading away continues to develop but now in a subordinate position.

The definition of the periods

A culture only offers a finite number of distinct roles for people according to their life course – 'toddler', 'school kid', 'teenager', or whatever. These will be different in each culture, but every society has such roles with the rights and expectations for everyone from the maternity ward to the retirement home. Each of these life stages constitutes a viable form of life through specific relationships between the person and those around them.

It is these culturally defined ages which are really significant. The numerical age given to each of the crises joining the stages together are purely conventional and approximate and vary historically and culturally.

In general, the driving force of the development in childhood is the predicament created by a *gap between the child's manifest needs and the current social means of their satisfaction*. This way of conceiving of the social situation of development is *universal*, but in every single case the situation is different because the adults providing for the child's needs do so differently in different cultural circumstances, and have different expectations of the child and will react differently to the child's behaviour, irrespective of the indeterminate impact of differences in the diet and physical conditions of existence that the

adults provide for the child. For example, the infant may grasp for her mother's breast, but the mother may or may not respond; the child's predicament is the same, but the outcome is different. In particular, a parent may fail to understand the significance of the excessive assertion of the child's own Will during the periods of difficulty. If the parent fails to respond to the new needs which the child is demanding, then some pathology of development must result. Actualisation of the social situation of development is different at every different cultural and historical juncture, and over and above individual differences, the normal course of development is different in each case. In that sense, development is culturally determined. But in each case, in examining the factors determining the course of development, we will look at this contradiction between the level of the child's development more or less corresponding to the manner in which the child's needs are being met, and the constraints this mode of interaction imposes on the child, insofar as the child is capable, at the relevant stage of development, of intuiting those constraints and strives to overcome them.

"Gradual" development

The subject matter of this work is the Will. I am focussing on the phases of crisis because it is during *these* phases that the Will develops. However, each crisis opens the door to a new phase of stable or so-called "gradual" development. I have put scare quotes on "gradual" because development during the stable phases is not strictly gradual, like grass growing. In fact, development during these phases also happens through crises, but "little" crises.

The difference is this.

The development which takes place during the phases of stable development has the character of *adaptation*. Having taken on a new role, the child develops appropriate new psychological functions which build on the accomplishment of the previous periods of development and prepares them for the next period of development, and so on till adulthood. The gradual development changes the relation of the person to the social environment, i.e., their personality, by a gradual adaptation to a new mode of behaviour. For example, the toddler gets steadier on their feet and toddling gradually becomes fall-free walking and baby talk gradually becomes coherent speech.

I call this process 'adaptation' because the child has already adopted a certain societal role and gained the right to play that role, what they have to do is *adapt themselves* to that role. This takes place to a great extent by trial-and-error, and every tiny error triggers a "little" crisis as the child adjusts themselves more perfectly to the demands of the given role.

During the crisis period, on the contrary, the child refuses to adapt and *overthrows* his or her former relation to the world and demands that the *world changes!* That is, that the adults around them treat them differently.

The critical phases and the phases of stable development are inextricably linked to one another and both equally necessary for successful adulthood. Child psychologists tend to focus on the various psychological functions which are mastered during the successive phases of gradual development, because the psychological formations accomplished in the period of gradual adaptation

continue to develop throughout life. The difficult behaviour of the critical people on the other hand appears as dysfunction, transitional and fades away. Each critical phase is characterised by the establishment of a specific psychological function which Vygotsky calls a 'neoformation'. The critical phases take on the appearance of mere rites of passage *between* age periods and their significance is easily overlooked. But all the textbooks on these periods of development give the periods of gradual development their due and I will merely take note of the neoformation in each case.

In this work, it is the critical phases which are of the greatest interest because they reveal the anatomy of the Will.

The Six Crises

I rely below on the excellent new translations of Vygotsky's pedagogical works (Vygotsky, 2021; 2021a; 2024; 2024a) where the periods of stable and critical development are explained in great detail with helpful editorial commentary.

1. The Crisis of Birth and the newborn

Approximately the first month after birth when the child is known as a 'newborn' constitutes a *critical phase* in the development of the child.

The psychic life of the newborn is predominantly linked to the subcortical centres of the brain and it is not retained as such in the subsequent development of the child, although it is included as a subordinate instance in a psychic formation of a higher order. The cortex is quite underdeveloped but the psychic life of the newborn exists but must be described as *rudimentary*. The helplessness of the newborn human compared to the relative independence of the newborns of other species, indicates that the ancient brain mechanisms are less autonomous in their functioning thanks to their links to still immature phylogenetically newer parts of the brain. Even the natural will is disabled and the behaviour of the newborn is marked only by uncoordinated instinctive movements – grasping, snuggling, sucking.

With birth, the newborn acquires the first condition for freedom of the Will in being separated from the mother physically, however, not biologically. The newborn is still entirely dependent on the mother for food, warmth, protection, and even basic mobility. The life of the newborn is one of dozing, with sleeping and waking states not yet differentiated. The development of a solid substratum of the psychic life of the child which began with conception continues after birth, not particularly affected by the moment of birth.

The social situation of development, the predicament defining the newborn phase of life, is the utter dependence of the child on their social environment, with the total absence of communicative speech.

The act of birth and the month or so of the life of the newborn is a critical phase of development distinct from the underlying development of the substratum of life which began with conception. With birth, the newborn breaks from its life in the womb and prepares for an independent life. The newborn knows only feelings (in Hegel's sense), no sensations and consequently, no distinction between itself and other, and no distinction between human objects and inanimate objects.

There are no inborn representations, no valid apperceptions, i.e. no understanding of external objects and processes as such, nor, finally, any conscious Will or aspiration.

Vygotsky, 2021a

The newborn feels only the situation *as a whole*, threatening or welcoming, diffusely, without being able to *ascribe* the feeling to any feature of their own condition or of the objective world or even differentiate between sight and sound. The sensori-motor nervous system is undifferentiated between perception and movement.

The central neoformation established in the newborn phase of life is the capacity to distinguish between figure and background:

The law of structuring or separating out the figure and the background constitutes, apparently, the most primitive feature of psychic life, forming the starting point of the subsequent development of consciousness.

op. cit.

The end of the newborn phase of development is the appearance of a smile in reaction to the human voice. This reflex is the beginning of the child's active participation in social life the essential condition for the development of consciousness and a Will.

2. Infancy

Infancy, approximately the first year of life after the newborn phase, is a phase of stable development. The infant is still immobile and dependent on adults to meet their every need so their actions are directed not at objects, but at adults around them. Every action the infant takes relies on the collaboration of an adult to succeed, and yet the infant lacks communicative speech. The infant can now perceive the presence of an adult, however. This is the predicament creating the social situation of development in infancy.

At the beginning of infancy, the child's muscles and skeleton are too weak for the child to do more than lie in their cot, but during this phase the infant begins to have enough motor control, strength and energy to actively interact with others. The brain increases in weight by a factor of 2.5 with the development of myelin sheath around the nerve fibres.

The accomplishment of the newborn phase was the ability to distinguish figure from background, and on the back of this newfound ability, the infant begins to take not just a passive, but an *active* interest in the outside world, even interrupting feeding to open its eyes, and is able to distinguish between the different sense organs and coordinate them. Its first social reaction, to smile in reaction to pleasure and surprise, is used to secure the collaboration of adults. The infant begins to have an influence over its stimuli, with a growing sensori-motor nervous system, reaching for objects and taking visual impressions of the world. The infant's active interest in the outside world shows

the capacity to actively go beyond direct drives and instinctive tendencies. For the child it is as if the external world has been discovered. This new relationship to reality signifies the beginning

of the infant period, or rather – of its first stage.

Vygotsky, op. cit.

In the second phase of infancy, the active interest in the world leads to prolonged processes of behaviour rather than distinct actions, drawing attention to objects, searching for missing toys. Imitation appears for the first time.

Whereas the newborn benefited not at all from its experiences, all their movements being determined by innate drives, the infant experiences the world through *conditioned reflexes* and thus begins the long process of adapting to the cultural world into which they have been thrust.

The infant's ability to recognise human voices and faces has still not allowed the infant to distinguish their *own* limbs from those of others. Their own limbs appear to it as alien objects. Affect is still driven by basic needs, but these basic needs can only be met in collaboration with their adult carers; they cannot yet handle material objects on their own.

As a result, the psychology of the infant Vygotsky characterises as an 'Ur-wir', that is, a primordial 'we'. The editors, Kellogg and Veresov, nicely liken this consciousness to the conscious we all experience while singing in a chorus, marching in a protest or watching our football team. The Ur-wir is a stable formation gradually increasing the scope of the infant's activity and the basic neoformation of the phase of infancy.

Lacking higher psychological functions, but with relatively well-developed motor skills and muscles, and interacting with the world around them thanks to participation in the Ur-wir, qualitatively new expressions of the child's actions become available, and this sets the scene for the crisis at one.

3. The crisis at one and Early Childhood

There is no completed manuscript of Vygotsky's views on the crisis at one, and the editors of the *Pedological Works* (2021a) have used "transcriptions of the spoken lectures apparently given while he was thinking through the chapters which he intended to write."

Vygotsky says that there are three neoformations to be found in the crisis at one: "hypobulic seizures" (i.e., sudden loss of initiative or will), "autonomous speech" and the child's first attempts at walking. Since the child's efforts at walking continue through into infancy and although new, they are not transitory formations. Both the 'hypobulic seizures' and the 'autonomous speech' with its associated behaviour fade away at the end of the transitional period. The question is the structure of the transition taking place as the infant extricates itself from the Ur-wir and establishes the Ich; which neoformation is leading?

Autonomous speech is composed of single-word indexical exclamations, what could be called 'verbal pointing'. The object indicated varies from one situation to the next. The meaning of the word is chain-like, one object being connected to the next by some feature, which is in turn connected to the next by some other feature. The words do not function as any kind of generalisation and although sounds are drawn from adult speech, they are not words in the adult lexicon. They form part of a behaviour in which the toddler draws attention to some object or expresses interest in or surprise at the object. It seems to me that this behaviour is the first crack in the Ur-wir.

The 'Ur-word' does function as a means of communication with adults, but the child cannot as yet use adult words, even though it may understand adult words and respond to them appropriately. Although the Ur-word is the embryo of speech in that it is its first means of verbal communication, the child at this age does not use adult words, and adults have great difficulty in understanding what the child is getting at. Vygotsky believes that "all of the hypobulic displays of the child stem from the difficulties of mutual understanding." This is all the more frustrating for the child, because the child is unaware that their adult carers do not share their consciousness. Why then is the child's effort to gain the adults' assistance failing?

The child's Will is directed at mastering this crucial form of behaviour.

Vygotsky repeatedly points out that the child's behaviour at this age, including its autonomous speech, marks the first manifestation of the child's own Will:

What does this affective-volitional content of child words mean? It means that what the child expresses in speech corresponds not to our assertions but rather more to our exclamations, with the aid of which we make affective appraisals, affective attitudes, emotional reactions and volitional tendencies. ... It is saturated with the volitional and not the intellectual moments.

op. cit.

The close connection of affect and Will is found here in an undifferentiated form.

The child who is in the period of crisis of one year, if unhappy with something, will often sit on the floor, lie on his back, throw himself on the floor and pound it with his arms and legs. In the crisis of the first year of life, the most significant feature of hypobulia consists in the non-differentiation of affect and will; i.e. the child's volitional motives stem from an instant of affect, which possesses the child at that moment. Undifferentiated affect and Will.

op. cit.

Vygotsky continues:

the crisis of age one, which, like all the critical ages, is characterised by the rapid development of affective life and marked by the first appearance in the child's affects of his proper personality—this is the first step in the development of the child's Will.

op. cit.

The fits of paralysis fade away when the infant succeeds in its first real speech act and dispenses with its autonomous speech. With this the Ur-wir is dispelled and the child can speak for itself. Its stumbling efforts to walk gradually improve. In making its first speech act, with difficulty, the child has expressed its own independent Will for the first time.

4. The toddler, early childhood

The child between the ages of one and three is colloquially called a 'toddler'.

the child's first word

a period of stable development

from mute to baby talk, from conditioned reflex to interest in the world and use of tools, from crawling to stumbling

mastery of speech

from unconscious to communicative speech

pp. 122-149

The child in early childhood is already a walking child—doing so badly, with difficulty—but nevertheless this is a child for whom walking is the basic form of moving through space.

For Bleuler, *autism* meant: a withdrawal from reality into one's own inner world of fantasy or thought.

A child who has begun to walk is already separate from the mother biologically but not yet psychologically separate—he still has no notion of himself as existing separately, outside of those concrete situations where he always has to deal with other people.

4. The Crisis at age 3

Negativism

Pre-schooler

can act independently

develops an intellectual orientation.

pp. 150-182

The Crisis at age 7 and School Age

Narcissism

School-age child

differentiation of behaviour and consciousness

pp. 185-253

The Crisis at age 13

autistic thinking in relation to concepts

puberty

The Crisis at age 17

own peer group – transitional, fades away as the youth makes enduring commitments such as marriage or employment.

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