

**FELIX MIKHAILOV: A LIFE DEVOTED TO THE
SELF-OTHER, INDIVIDUAL-SOCIETY DIALECTS**

**Uma vida dedicada ao auto (eu)-outro,
Dialética de uma sociedade individual**

Une vie consacrée aux Dialectiques du soi et de l'autre et de l'individu-société

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Abstract: Felix Trofimovich Mikhailov, a leading theoretical psychologist and philosopher, who has been described to have been “one of the leading theoretical psychologists of the new twenty-first century and a successor to the traditions of Russian philosophical psychology’ represented by the names of L. S. Vygotsky, A. n.Leontiev and others. There is tremendous depth in the work of a scholar little known in the West. Most importantly, he articulated aspects of language that without doubt elaborate and extend the seeds that L. S. Vygotsky had sown round about the time that Mikhailov was born. In this article, we outline some of his ideas and how these relate especially to and continue the work of Vygotsky, which lies in their common commitment (a) to the Spinozist unity of being that expresses itself in the identity of body and mind, self and Other and (b) to dialectical materialist form of investigation.

Keywords: Inter-intrasubjectivity. Dialectics. Other.

Resumo: Felix Trofimovitch Mikhailov, psicólogo e filósofo que tem sido

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descrito como tendo sido “um dos principais psicólogos teóricos do novo século XXI” é um sucessor das tradições da psicologia filosófica russa que é representada por nomes como L. S. Vigotski , A. N. Leontiev e outros. Há uma tremenda profundidade no trabalho desse estudioso que é muito pouco conhecido no Ocidente. Ele articulou aspectos da linguagem que, sem dúvida estende as sementes que Vygotsky havia semeado no mesmo período de tempo em Mikhailov nasceu. Neste artigo vamos delinear algumas de suas idéias e como estas se relacionam especialmente com o trabalho de Vygotsky e sua continuidade, ao qual apresentam em comum: (a) a unidade Spinozist de ser que se expressa na identidade do corpo e da mente, si mesmo e o Outro e (b) a forma de investigação dialética materialista.

Palavras-chave: Inter-intrasubjetividade. Dialética. Outro.

Résumé: Felix Trofimovich Mikhailov, psychologue et philosophe, décrit comme « l'un des principaux psychologues théoriciens du nouveau XXIe siècle » est le perpétuateur de la tradition psychologique et philosophique russe, représentée par des noms tels que LS Vygotsky, AN Leontiev et d'autres. La grande profondeur des travaux de ce savant reste peu connue en Occident, notamment en matière d'articulation de différents aspects du langage qui, sans doute, ont élaboré et étendu les graines que L. S. Vygotsky avait semées pendant la même période de naissance de Mikhailov. Cet article vise aussi bien à présenter certaines de ses idées qu'à définir les liens de ces dernières avec le travail de Vygotski et sa continuité, qui ont en commun ceci: (a) l'unité spinoziste de l'être qui est exprimée dans l'identité du corps et de l'esprit, le soi et l'autre et (b) la façon dialectique et matérialiste de faire de la recherche.

Mots-clé: Inter-intrasubjectivité. Dialectique. Autre.

Introduction

Kant's axiom – *the identity of corporeality and subjectivity*, taking us back to Spinoza, to his single substance of being – is the axiom

of the general science of man, which lies, I repeat, at the basis of physiology, psychology, history, literary studies, and all other theoretical disciplines that have as their object the life and activity of man (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 49).

In this introductory quotation, written just prior to the author's death, we not only find the essence of his later thought but also the relation to the writings of L. S. Vygotsky, perhaps his most important precursor in taking up a psychological agenda grounded in the work of Spinoza. There is a (dialectical) identity of corporeality and subjectivity, which are not two parallel planes, but indeed two different manifestations of one and the same, single reality. This single being is, so the fundamental axiom that Mikhailov accepts, is the essence of physiology, psychology, history, literary studies, and all other theoretical disciplines – not in the way they currently are but in the way they are still to come. This approach had been foreshadowed in the very last texts of Vygotsky, who had never been in the position to develop them further by removing logical contradictions that the early formulations still contained. An axiom needs no proof, for it is the basis and exists a priori to theory, as Mikhailov explicates by means of the axioms of Euclidean geometry.

A lot of the writing in Mikhailov's texts is reminiscent of Vygotsky both in the way Felix Trofimovich is true to the historical aspect of his investigations by situating psychology in other endeavors of humanity, including literature and philosophy, and especially in his method, which is the practice of (materialist) dialectics. Although Western scholars often ascribe the references of Russian scholars to the work of Marx/Engels as giving lip service to the political regime – which may or may not be the case in some situation for Felix Trofimovich as much as for Vygotsky – their common method of investigation is Marxian through and through. For Mikhailov, this form of dialectical analysis characterizes his writing through the glasnost and perestroika era right into the 21st century, that is, at times when lip service to Marx/Engels no longer was required from scholars to survive. Most importantly, Felix Trofimovich practices a material dialectics that is *not applied* to specific cases but, as Engels suggests, finds them in the phenomena. Vygotskij (1982, p. 419) already notes, “the *direct* application of the theory of *dialectical materialism* to the problems of natural

science and in particular to the group of biological sciences or psychology *is impossible*, just as it is *impossible to apply it directly* to history and sociology”. Mikhailov certainly would have thought the same about attempts to *implement* dialectical materialism in educational efforts. As he notes about the failure of the “Elkonin-Davydov school”: “A delightful result has been obtained: the theory exists in isolation and practice corresponds nominally to theory” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 34).

In sum, this article is devoted to a psychologist-philosopher who truly worked in the lineage of Vygotsky, not because he references and acknowledges the originator of the cultural (societal-) historical school but because, in the content and form of his investigation, his work constitutes a true continuation of the movement of scholarly thought that Vygotsky had initiated.

Biographical notes

There is little available in English about the life of Felix Trofimovich Mikhailov; and, according to his own admission, there is not much to be learned from his biography that would elucidate his work—were it not for his modest background in a working class family. But some of our colleagues who knew him, such as Michael Cole and David Bakhurst, describe him as kind, fun, and admirable. We know that Felix Trofimovich was born on April 12, 1930 in the Kazakh city of Chimkent (now Shymkent); and he died just short of his 76th birthday on February 22, 2006 in Moscow, Russia, where he had lived almost his entire life (VORONIN, 2000). In 1954, He graduated with a degree in philosophy from Moscow State University where had followed the same program as Raisa Titarenko, the future wife of the leader of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev; he also had a very active relationship with Merab Mamardashvili, who would become one of the most interesting contemporary philosophers with interests in language and consciousness very similar to that of Mikhailov. Felix Trofimovich began his university career in 1957 as a lecturer at the Russian Medical University, where, from 1961 to 1971 he was head of the department of philosophy. He received a doctorate in philosophy in 1963 (Kandidat filosofskix nauk), with the thesis on the topic of “The Methodological Basis for Psychoanalysis.”

Apparent from his birth date, Felix Trofimovich grew up during the difficult times of the Stalinist era, with its repressive attitude towards open

intellectual endeavors, and the physical-emotional toil related to World War II. Yet he describes those times into which he was born and that marked the first few years of his life as remarkable, for “never again did such a short interval witness the creation and publication of so many profound investigations and masterpieces, marked with the stamp of genius literally in all branches of culture! It was precisely in this period that A. F. Losev, G. G. Spet, M. M. Bakhtin, and L. S. Vygotsky created and published their work” (MIKHAILOV, 2006c, p. 59). But during the Stalinist era, theoreticians could not deviate from dogma. Continuing a trend that he ascribed to his youth, Felix Trofimovich attributed his personal development to his status in the margins. He notes that “finding [him]self in the position of a social outcast there suddenly were revealed to me, as to all other ‘inadvertent deviationists,’ many others by their creative heterodoxy and truly moral essence” (MIKHAILOV, 2006c, p. 63). At his time, difference from the official line was dangerous, and any “deviation of a theoretician or lecturer from [Stalin’s definitions], laws, and principles was punished in highly diverse ways, from deprivation of the right to lecture to arrest or commitment to a psychiatric hospital” (MIKHAILOV, 2006c, p. 61). Yet new philosophical ideas emerged even under the repressive regime of J. Stalin; and they did so in what we might call following Plato *khôra*, a productive gap of cultural creativity arising from the engagement with the classical and contemporary philosophical literature.

For the 12-year period from 1972-1984, Felix Trofimovich worked at the Russian Academy of Education, where he was head of the Laboratory of Theoretical Problems of the Psychology of Activity—as he pointed out, even before having received his doctorate (*kandidat*) or his habilitation (*dokor*) (VORONIN, 2000). After that he continued as a chief researcher in the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Science. He defended his thesis *Societal Consciousness and Individual Self-consciousness* in 1988; it was published in 1991. In 1993, he was elected Member of the Russian Academy of Education. In 1997, he obtained a second doctorate (*Doktor filosofskix nauk*), which, equivalent to the German or Scandinavian habilitation, requires significant scientific output. Mikhailov held a chair as professor of psychology of work and psychological engineering at his alma mater from 2004 on. In his academic career, he supervised 12 post-graduate fellows at the *kandidat* level (PhD) and 4 post-graduate fellows at the *doktor* (habilitation) level.

It was during the years as the head of the Laboratory of Theoretical Problems of the Psychology of Activity, in 1982-1983, that D. Bakhurst had the opportunity to meet and spend time with Felix Trofimovich generally, where an important seminar took place that included, besides Bakhurst and Mikhailov, also the philosopher v.S. Bibler, the theorist v.A. Lektorsky, and the educational psychologist v.V. Davydov, then Director of the Institute of General and Pedagogical Psychology in Moscow (BAKHURST *et al.*, 1995).

Reflecting on his youth, Felix Trofimovich talks about avidly reading, including Dickens and Dostoyevsky, the latter of which was perhaps his most famous author. At the time, though only 13-14 years old, he and his friends were heavily drinking, after having become acquainted with its taste while working voluntarily in labor camps. But he thinks that his avid reading saved him. In ninth grade, Felix Trofimovich had read v.Lenin's major philosophical work, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, which, by tenth grade, he already knew by heart, as he said. He found it brilliant and highly interesting, and he related this impression to the fact that he matured in philosophy. Together with the book *Anti-Dühring* (MARX & ENGELS, 1975) – which articulates the three main parts of Marx and Engel's teachings: dialectical and historical materialism, political economy, and the theory of scientific communism – it became one of the formative works in/on his development (VORONIN, 2000). However, when he attended lectures on dialectical materialism, he realized that the lectures were inconsistent with what he had read at home. He thought that the lectures and what he had to study to succeed in examinations were terribly simplistic. From the beginning, philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Fichte, Hegel, and the non-politicized (non-ideological) Karl Marx had special significance in his intellectual development (MIKHAILOV, 2006a). Their rigorous forms of investigation became for him a model for establishing a philosophical basis of psychology. Later, he was tremendously influenced by psychologist working within cultural-historical activity theory, including A. n.Leont'ev, A. R. Luria, and p.Ia. Galperin. The most important influences derived from his friendship and interactions with E. v.II'enkov and v.V. Davydov.

Mikhailov was a forthright scholar: he did not hesitate to publically acknowledge his scholarly friends and where he disagreed with them. For example, he recounts a week he had spent with D. B. Elkonin in Berlin, where they were going to the movies or attended operatic performances. He

notes that they had a lot of time for “heart-to-heart theoretical conversations,” and in these conversations “disputes flared up frequently” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 38). For example, he notes being especially critical of Elkonin’s idea of *leading activity* and that he attacked the latter “desperately criticizing” this idea. It turns out that a departure of the school-centered idea of leading activity was initiated by an incident in Elkonin’s own life, which the psychologist related to Felix Trofimovich during a train-ride to some conference. Elkonin’s four-year old grandson had responded to the request to bring a cup of tea and in this address by his grandfather came to understand that he was needed. It was in the everyday setting of his home office that Elkonin became to deeply understand one of Vygotsky’s classic ideas: “man lives in a world of senses and affects, addressed to himself and addressed by him to others” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 39). It is in this case that ceases to exist the idea of a “learning activity,” at least in the (narrow) way in which Elkonin and Davydov had formulated it. Living communication, where participants address, and feel addressed by, each other. In cultural-educational centers, where adults and children work on a single task of mutual interest, learning would occur in accord with the language of the child’s own voice.

Where might we find the personality of Felix Trofimovich most expressed? It turns out in an article, which he began to “establish that cultural-historical activity has turned into a myth” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 21) only to find out in the course of his writing, and with some surprise, that cultural-historical theory is *alive*, and, as such, “has its methodological bases and problems” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 50). It is in the dialectic of working out the theory that he also identifies it as *living*, inherently contradictory phenomenon in the course of becoming. It is throughout his work that Felix Trofimovich has contributed to the development of a general psychology that was already foreshadowed in the writings of L. S. Vygotsky some 80 years ago but always remains to (be-)come, for when it *ceases* to (be-) come it is dead.

Major themes in the work

In this section, we focus on three main themes in the work of Mikhailov that he himself highlighted in an interview (VORONIN, 2000): (a) the relationship between self and other, individual and society, well captured

in the title of one of his papers “The ‘Other Within’ of Psychology”; (b) the dialectical materialist method of investigation; and (c) implications for pedagogy, curriculum and instruction.

The “Other Within” of psychology

The “unit” of the psychic [is] the *act of communication, the act of addressing others and addressing the self as some kind of other* (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 36).

We chose as the title of this section the title of one of Mikhailov’s articles, because it expresses so well the core concern of his thought, which exists “in the idea of the sense-generating address (of news, speech, missive) to the world of another person in the hope of a kind, clever, esthetically expressive and invariably sincere, authentic (literally: creatively original) *response*” (KUDRYAVTSEV, 2006, p. 8). It is that same addressivity that we can also find in the work of the literary scholar M. M. Bakhtin (e.g., 1984); it is precisely on the lack of addressivity in the approach *object-oriented activity* that leads to his critique of the latter approach (MIKHAILOV, 2006b). And that addressivity also leads to *answerability*, one of the central notions Bakhtin (1993) had developed and that also marked the above-noted seminar involving D. Bakhurst. To illustrate this idea, which has yet to be comprehended in the West, consider the following exchange between a second-grade teacher and one of her students, Gina, in a mathematics lesson, where the motive is to arrive at a new form of classification of objects that is not based on color or size. Gina has placed her object on a new mat but has not provided a justification. After Gina has not come forth with a statement of her thought even though there had been a considerable amount of time, the teacher *addresses* the student again, first by formulating the issue “there must be something different because you gave it its new, its own category,” and then by offering another invitation for stating thought, “can you tell us what you thought was different between the two” (turn 05).

Fragment 1

- 01 (*Gina places her object, as in offprint.*)
 02 (0.8) (*Gina retreats to her seat.*)
 03 W: now can you tell us what you're thinking?
 04 (3.5) (*Gina scratches her ear and brings her hand to her chin as culture associates with thinking.*)
 → 05 W: there must be something different (*Mrs. Winter gesticulates towards objects on the floor*) because you gave it its new, its own category; can you tell us what you thought was different between the two (*Mrs. Winter points to the cube and cylinder*)
 06 (0.8)
 07 G: they're different shapes? (*Changes gaze and body from being oriented towards objects to face of Mrs. Winter.*)

In turn 05, Mrs. Winter talks; but she talks not merely to empty some contents of her mind into the public arena of the classroom. Instead, she orients towards Gina and directly addresses the girl. Mrs. Winter does so using a language that is not her own but that has come to her from “the Other,” which, therefore, in the form of language resides within her (MIKHAILOV, 2001).



And in orienting towards the child, Mrs. Winter uses a language inherently considered intelligible by Gina and her classmates, for she could not hope for any reply unless the children understand. That is, the statement Mrs. Winter directs towards Gina not only has come from the Other, but also returns to the Other; and it is shaped by the intellectual needs of that Other. That is, the statement “can you tell us what you thought was different between the two” is shaped, in content and form, through and through by the addressee in whose ears the words ring while they unfurl from Mrs. Winter’s mouth. Precisely when she expresses herself, she also materializes what is not hers and, in this, concretizes the human essence, which exists as a contradiction that is the heart of the *be-*

coming of human life-activity (BAKHURST et al., 1995). Of course, the *address*, which offers up a question, is inviting a *response*. And it is geared to obtaining precisely this response, an orientation that is even more salient in this case where there is a question | reply pair in the making.

Following a brief pause, Gina responds to the invitation by accepting it, offering up a candidate difference: shape. Although this is a response, it also addresses itself to the Other, her Mrs. Winter. The same analysis is valid for Gina, who, using a language that has come from the Other, returns it to the Other in her reply. This statement “they’re different shapes” again is not just something from and characteristic of the mind of the child but instead (a) constitutes a transformation and building on the voice of the Other and (b) is geared towards the Other as a sincere and expressive return to the invitation received. We observe this phenomenon of the “‘Other Within’ for the psychologist” that has been a central concern of Felix Trofimovich in the following rendering of the structure in the two turns. Those very words that Mrs. Winter speaks also are the words that Gina hears. These words are not the words of one person, for as such they would not be words at all (VYGOTSKIJ, 1934). Instead, the structure highlights the fact that “the word is in consciousness, following Feuerbach, impossible for one, but is a possibility for two (VYGOTSKIJ, 1934, p. 318). This double ownership of the word is expressed in a re-transcription of parts of Fragment 1 as the sociological dimension (Figure 1). In each word we find a “process of active intercourse,” which is “resolving the given contradiction, the dialogue between the general and the particular” (MIKHAILOV, 1980, p. 179) in the sense that the word belongs to all (general) and resonates in the mouth or ear of each participant (particular). “In the real space and time of intercourse this contradiction becomes a dialogue of two representatives of the particular or, if you will, two particular representations of the general” (MIKHAILOV, 1980, p. 179).

Felix Trofimovich pursued an agenda that we also see in Vygotskij’s work, which is the tie between societal consciousness and individual self-consciousness and the recognition that “language is practical consciousness that exists for other human beings and therefore also for myself” (VYGOTSKIJ, 1934, p. 318). As Figure 1 shows, the psychological dimension cannot be separated from the sociological one, and the ability to respond is presupposed in the ability to speak and address

another. There would be no use for speaking unless there was not already the capacity to hear (i.e., understand), listen, and to respond. This is a position that we also find in language philosophy at the time, and, “his work coincided in no way by accident with revolutionary breakthroughs in the theory of language . . . and in the theory of verbal creativity (M. M. Bakhtin)” (MIKHAILOV, 2001, p. 15). Indeed, many of the statements Vygotskij makes can also be found in a book by the Bakhtin associate v.N. Vološinov (1930), *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka* [Marxism and the philosophy of language] (e.g., ROTH, 2013).

← Sociological →	05	W (<i>says</i>): can you tell us what you thought was different between the two	
	05	G (<i>hears</i>): can you tell us what you thought was different between the two	07 (<i>speaks</i>): they're different shapes

← Psychological →

Figure 1. Each act of speaking irreducibly involves sociological and psychological dimensions because the word in the mouth of the speaker also rings in the ear of the recipient, whose active reception is the first part of the diastatic response spread across reception and reply.

For Felix Trofimovich, it was precisely in this logic of the address and anticipated response that we can find the origin of human culture. He extends Vygotskij's insistence of the unity of affect and intellect; and, like Vygotskij, he pursues the contention that “*affective thought as an attribute of life* is the proper object of psychology” (KUDRYAVTSEV, 2006, p. 9). Affect also is notable in Fragment 1, in the form of intonations. Thus, for example, we can hear Gina's uncertainty, when the intonation rises towards the end of the statement, which allows us to hear it as a question. That is, even though the statement can be heard as a reply to the question about what is different between the two shapes on the floor, it can also be heard as a question. Gina offers up a possible answer and at the same time queries whether this is *the* answer to the question thereby leaving open the possibility that there might be another, perhaps better answer as well.

Gina's turn allows us to consider another problematic at the heart of Mikhailov's work that constitutes a continuation from Vygotskij: the soci(et)al. We observe it here in the fact that the statement in turn 07 is not an answer in itself. The nature of the turn as answer cannot be provided by traditional semantic or syntactic analysis. Instead, the nature of the turn as answer has sociological origin – it is a function of the sequentially ordered turn taking that constitutes relations (Figure 1). The answer is a *social* rather than linguistic fact; and it is in the sociality of the turn taking that we can find the primacy of the social as it exists in Vygotskij's and in Felix Trofimovich's work.

We can also see here the importance of the unity of the material body of the word and its semantic aspects. Too frequently – and almost exclusively especially in the postmodern and post-structural approaches – scholars are concerned with “meaning,” all the while forgetting that in many instances the “meaning” of a word is completely irrelevant. Thus, Vološinov (1930) and Vygotskij (1934) discuss a story from the *Diary of an Author* by Dostoevsky, in which six drunken workmen have a “conversation,” which exists of six repetitions of the same word too obscene to be named and printed. But the obscenity is not the point at all. Instead, Dostoevsky heard affectively charged commentaries on some part of the conversation that had occurred earlier. In the same way, I found in my dataset a classroom episode in which the word “penis” was articulated ten times in sequence; and yet the dictionary sense of “penis” was never an issue (ROTH, 2015). Separating the semantic aspects of the word from its material body lies at the heart of the problems of traditional psychology and linguistics (VYGOTSKIJ, 1934); and that same separation renews Cartesianism, Descartes cannot really be held accountable for that continuation (MIKHAILOV, 2001). Thus, the currently pervasive idea of mediators – sitting somewhere in the middle between “man's spiritual life and the corporally extended substance linking the two together” (MIKHAILOV, 2001, p. 6) – reproduces the separation of mind and body rather than overcoming it. Stating that most of the scholars referring to Vygotskij do so to meet their own specific needs and in contradistinction to what the scholar was about, Mikhailov adopts from Vygotskij the solution to the body–mind problem in the *real* Spinoza: “the *one substance* was the key to the concept of ‘one's intimate other’” (MIKHAILOV, 2001, p. 11). Thus, lines of bio-

logical and cultural development form a meshwork that cannot be taken apart without misinterpreting what development is all about. Although he recognizes that some Western scholars have taken up the idea of the *unity* of opposites – the sort of parallelism between biology and culture, body and mind that Vygotsky (1999) in his *Teaching about Emotion* decries – he rejects their version, because the material and the spiritual are treated at two very different phenomena held together by human life. But this is not the unit that Mikhailov, as Vygotskij, was after, which is a Spinozist one: “an instance of two different manifestations of one process, the process of genesis, diversification, and growing complexity of *one and the same* principle” (VYGOTSKY, 1999, p. 14, original emphasis).

Pursuing the same goal as Vygotskij, the unity of body and mind, Mikhailov notes that there is a point with which he disagrees with the former, which lies in his aphorism from a late manuscript “Tool and Sign in the Development of the Child” (VYGOTSKY, 1984): “if at the beginning of development stands the deed, independent of the word, then at its end stands the word becoming deed. It is the word that makes the action of man free” (VYGOTSKY, 1984, p. 89). Mikhailov disagrees because there still exists an either/or. He suggests, however, that Vygotskij died too young to address this problem, which he has taken on to address and, thereby, build on and further develop the seeds that Vygotskij had sown. There cannot be a “mutual determination” of self and Other, but instead, there is only one substance. Material form realizes and is present in the mind, for which it exists; and mind exists in and for material form. He paraphrases an aphorism by the German author-poet J. W. von Goethe for his own purposes, which represents an advanced formulation of his Spinozism:

There is nothing *other* for us from the outset that would not be our *own*. *For the very existence of the mind is possible only at the borderline where there is a continual coming and going of one into the other*, at their dynamic interface, as it were – an interface that is defined not by the fact of their difference (in other words, not by a difference in outward [discernible by the subject] states between what is psychologically *self* and what is *other*, the stuff of natural science, as it were), but by the single process of their mutual generation and determination. (MIKHAILOV, 2001, p. 21)

Readers may recall what we say above about the exchange between Gina and Mrs. Winter, each using language that has come to them from the Other and that returns to the Other in their speaking. That continuous creation of self and Other, Felix Trofimovich finds at the heart of other scholars' works, including M. M. Bakhtin (e.g. 1984), who postulated as a first principle of dialogism the continuous dialogic *concordance*, where, even in the monologue of the confession, "the role of the other person was revealed, in whose sole light could any word about oneself be constructed" (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 289). As we note above, when Gina speaks, her words are *for* Mrs. Winter, they reach towards her as towards the Other generally: the words spoken are hers and Mrs. Winter's simultaneously. Felix Trofimovich finds these ideas also in the writings of his old friend M. Mamardashvili, whom he quotes aphoristically: "Thought exists only at the moment of its creation, only as the act of the idea creating it here and now" (MIKHAILOV, 2001, p. 22).

The central location where such transformation occurs is joint activity in communication, such as we find in the exchanges between Mrs. Winter and her students generally and, in Fragment 1, with Gina in particular. This joint activity constitutes "a special psychological space," indeed, a "tense field of joint experience of a future action for one another with all the means of cooperation" (MIKHAILOV, 2001, p. 26). This cooperation includes making visible to the Other the ordered and orderly aspects of the situation, where each word in fact re/creates the experiential field of the Other – e.g., when Mrs. Winter articulates an invitation / question, which creates a new reality for Gina. As a consequence, joint activity "creates the borderline situation in which the alien is identical with one's own and one's own exists as an experienced reality of Other" (MIKHAILOV, 2001, p. 26). This, however, occurs from the beginning of a person's life so that everything a child comes to relate to – objects, language, others – are not mediators between the child and an alien (outside) world. Instead, these are subjectively her own just as they are subjectively everyone's. It is this position that Mikhailov develops in his doctoral dissertation *Obščestvennoe soznanie, samosoznanie individa* [Societal consciousness, individual self-consciousness]. Language, so Mikhailov (2006b) accepts and identifies as the hear of Vygotsky's cultural-historical logic, is not a mere means of communication between people but an environment for the realization of the historical being of humans. It is a fundamentally Spinozist position, which another friend of Felix Trofimovich

explicates in his treatise *Dialectical Logic*: “the more numerous and varied the means it has ‘to move and arrange external bodies’, the more it has ‘in common’ with other bodies” (IL’ENKOV, 1977, p. 69).

Felix Trofimovich writes about communication as constituting a *moral* field, where an address to the other “reproduc[es] this field as an intersubjective reality” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 45). The nature of communication as a deontological field can easily be demonstrated with the materials in Fragment 1. Thus, there is a double responsibility in each turn because it retroactively attributes the effect to a preceding speaking turn while affecting the addressee in a future tense (ROTH, 2013). Thus, when Mrs. Winter says, “now can you tell us what you’re thinking?” (turn 03), she in fact will have exposed Gina, who, in not replying, can be seen as not knowing or understanding. In orienting herself actively to the address of another, Gina actually has to expose herself and, thereby, makes herself vulnerable – e.g., to being exposed as incapable of providing a reply. But in not acting, Gina also exposes the teacher, who has de facto offered a question that the child cannot answer rather than having offered one that the child could have answered. That is, in Gina’s not replying comes to be exposed Mrs. Winter’s failure to ask questions appropriate to the level of the child. In their continued address to the other, and in accepting the address directed to themselves, Gina and Mrs. Winter in fact re/create the moral field that simultaneously constitutes their condition. This field is an intersubjective reality, not one of an encounter of individual subjectivities that are blind to the subjectivities of others. It is in this field that humans acquire the capacity for the subjective motivation of their actions. In other words, it is in that field that the tie of action and accounts so dear to ethnomethodological researchers comes to be established and it is in that field that our answerability comes to stand out. We observe that tie established in the joint work of Fragment 1, when Gina places her object, Mrs. Winter asks for her thinking, and Gina eventually replies, “they’re different shapes.” When that sequence of actions for and towards the other at some point later comes to be compiled into one action of Gina, what has been a social relation now is a higher psychological function – just as Vygotsky (1989) had suggested. What develops, Gina’s subjectivity, simultaneously is intersubjectivity, here found as the relation of the three turns. Thus, “subjectivity is a specific life regime and not a characteristic of an observed individual” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 37). In

this quotation, together with the contention that “the real and the ideal are an ordinary categorical (measure) pair, the inner contradiction of which is the moving force of any thought”, we find condensed “the true continuation of the ideas of Vygotsky” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 37), a continuation co-produced and espoused by its author, Felix Trofimovich Mikhailov, the subject of the present article. It encapsulates a fundamentally Spinozist theme, which characterizes the very last writings of Vygotsky, and that can be found throughout the writings of Felix Trofimovich.

Dialectical method: in Vygotsky’s footsteps

So it is from the history of nature and of human society that the laws of dialectics are abstracted. These are nothing other than the most general laws of the two phases of the historical development of thinking. And they are reducible mainly to three:

- the law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa;
- the law of the interpenetration of opposites;
- the law of the negation of negation (MARX/ENGELS, 1975, p. 348).

Mikhailov constitutes a continuation of Vygotsky not only in the substance of his analysis and writing but also in the method, particularly as this is outlined in the “Istoricheskij smysl psikhologicheskogo krizisa [Historical Sense of the Crisis of Psychology]” (VYGOTSKIJ, 1982). It is not by accident, therefore, that he would reference this Vygotskij essay in his deconstruction of a key term of the activity approach: the object-oriented nature of activity (MIKHAILOV, 2004). Here, deconstruction is to be taken in the sense of the German *Abbau*, in the tradition of G. W. F. Hegel and M. Heidegger, where a construction is taken apart for the purpose of rebuilding it bottom up and in new ways. In this essay, he denotes his approach as the *conceptual-genetic method*, while pointing out the weaknesses of the comparative historical and comparative categorical methods because they fail to take into account how new formations – such as object-orientation – could have come about from, based on, and using the tools available in non-object-oriented activity. He shows how these other two methods alone, though also included in his own method, lead researchers back to body-mind

dualism sometimes hidden in the idea of a parallelism of body and mind. Most importantly, he suggests that whereas “the supporters of ‘the activity approach’ name Vygotsky as its founding father,” he in fact pursued a very different goal than they, one in direct opposition, by “striv[ing] to affirm a different principle of their merger [of nature and culture] – the principle of unity *with difference*, unity but unity of *opposites*” (MIKHAILOV, 2004, p. 18). Accordingly, nature and culture, as per Spinoza, are but two manifestations of a single substance: self-creating Nature.

Mikhailov’s way of reasoning is dialectical, identifying, among others, the law of the transformation of quantity into quality. Thus, he argues in a dialectical materialist way, that what is characteristically human – as distinct from other animals generally arose as a *qualitatively* new form that was unattainable by mere quantitative increments from existing forms among primates, including tool use. That is, the essence of “actual development – the process of form of a *new* quality” lies in the fact that it “remains outside of its own frame of reference” (MIKHAILOV, 1980, p. 166). He argues, just as Vygotskij (1982) has done, that the intellect of the chimpanzee, the most advanced form of thinking in the animal world, is *qualitatively* (in kind and type) different from the human intellect. What arose was precisely the “man’s voluntary and goal-conforming life-activity” (VYGOTSKJ, 1982, p. 25). Mikhailov uses the classical philosophical term *causa sui* to denote that the new formation – Vygotsky called it neoformation – arose without having its ground (cause) in previous formations. Given the wide popularization of chaos theory, readers will be familiar with the diagrams exhibiting the bifurcation of a system where new states emerge that cannot be causally related to the states possible prior to the bifurcation. Mikhailov shows that the foundation of the new quality “cannot be a *mediator* between *nature* and the *individuals* of our conjectured population, if only because it is precisely the mediator that predetermines the contrary dichotomy” (VYGOTSKJ, 1982, p. 25). Instead, “the transformation of the subjective motivation of our forebears’ behavior occurred in the most object-oriented sphere of subjectivity – that is, in that mutual relation whose object is precisely the externalized subjectivity of the other” (VYGOTSKJ, 1982, p. 25).

The problem of showing how something completely new can emerge cannot be solved in classical psychological approaches because they work with variables; and variables only change quantitatively. Only approaches

that allow quantity to change into quality, and quality into quantity, can deal with the emergence of the new from continuous variation of the old. For those familiar with dialectical materialism, it is not without surprise that Felix Trofimovich would refer to the same law of the transformation of quantity into quality, initially articulated by Engels, to which Vygotskij (1982) also appeals. This is so because “we are compelled to acknowledge that no adaptations or ‘improvements,’ no *more, faster, more intensive*, and other such *quantitative* spells are capable of making inherited species-specific traits of involuntary behavior voluntary” (MIKHAILOV, 2004, p. 16). And just like Vygotsky, who grounded himself in Marx/Engels, he seeks the essence of the phenomenon in the most developed forms of behavior, in the most difficult of cases, because it is here that the *general* laws are most clearly apparent. This does not mean that he does a teleological construction but instead that he engages in finding what is general in the Spinozist unity that allows the emergence of culture by sublating evolutionary processes, where the term sublating (Hegel’s *aufheben*) has the sense of overcoming and of retaining/keeping. Thus, “object-substantive thinking” that underlies all labor and object-oriented activity can be reconstructed logically “only by relying on the highest forms of self-reflective self-consciousness that most fully represent its essence” (MIKHAILOV, 2004, p. 16). We do so “by positing precisely that essence as force that transformed the type of life-activity of that population (or those populations of animals to which we owe our existence on the planet)” (MIKHAILOV, 2004, p. 16).

We already see in the preceding section that the self and Other interpenetrate, just as the second special law of dialectics states (see introductory quotation). In the analysis of Fragment 1, we show how the social relation between Mrs. Winter and Gina is the first appearance of the link between an action (a mathematical classification) and its account; later, that relation will appear in Gina’s contributions to the classroom talk. For Vygotsky (1989), such relations are the origin of all higher psychological functions. And it is precisely that new, social relation of our forebears that emerges in anthropogenesis: “a relation to one another’s subjectivity that generated its own reflexivity” (MIKHAILOV, 2004, p. 27). This relation itself was not “in itself capable of transforming the natural factors of their life but did turn out to be capable of transforming

the subjective behavioral motivation of the *other* into experience of the *self* as the new formation” (MIKHAILOV, 2004, p. 27). That relation to another’s subjectivity is shown in our analysis of Fragment 1: in the form of how each speaker orients towards the recipient, addresses the *Other*, speaks for her benefit, by using the language of the Other into experience of the self, for example, in Gina’s experience of a reply to the invitation to state *her* thinking: “they’re different shapes.” That “intra-intersubjectively” available, objective presence of the motive of activity is what distinguishes humans from other animals. It arose in anthropogenesis when the “*intrasubjective* motive of the constant and indispensable reproduction of the *intersubjectivity* of shared existence appeared before them just as much *from without* as the form of the stone surface of cave walls or other shelters” (MIKHAILOV, 2004, p. 28). The order of the shared, inter-intrasubjective reality is not just there, but it is continually made visible by participants, such as when Mrs. Winter, by saying “now can you tell us what you’re thinking” not only invites Gina but indeed co-articulates that the thinking was not yet apparent; and making thinking apparent is one of the fundamental properties of mathematical activity that distinguishes it from other activities where the mere fact of placing something in the proper way is sufficient for the purposes at hand. In other context, the thinking does not have to be made public and objectified, and it is only when there is cause for disagreement that a classification objectified through an act is questioned or rectified. That is, it is that very relation between Mrs. Winter and Gina that the ordered and orderly nature of *mathematical* activity first comes to exist. The forms of culture and social order are objective because since her birth, every person finds and exhibits it in the ways and means of intercourse she encounters (MIKHAILOV, 1980). Thus, Mrs. Winter and Gina, “as each individualised *Homo sapiens*, is an individuality only insofar as the process of individualisation itself is the goal-oriented realisation of her social relations” (p. 169). Each action is always material and ideal. In truly Vygotskian manner (e.g., in the inseparability of the sound and sense of a word), Mikhailov (2004, p. 30-31) states that “true *objectivity*” is “the real ideality of all *always material* means for the generation, regeneration, improvement, and expanded reproduction of the birth community of people”.

Some thoughts on pedagogics and schooling

At least since the publication of *Zagadka chelovecheskogo ja* [The riddle of self] (1964/1980), Mikhailov has advocated forms of pedagogy in which learners themselves are involved, an idea based on the Marx/Engels recognition that human change is related to the changing of conditions. Thus, “the pupil is not ‘the object of the pedagogical process’ but an equal subject in it” (MIKHAILOV, 1980, p. 170). This was not the case in the classroom, where Mrs. Winter together with a mathematics educator had designed the tasks for specific curriculum-related purposes rather than following the interests of the children. The contradiction in the two teachers’ approach was that they described their curriculum as child-centered all the while working on influencing the events so that the pre-specified curriculum outcomes would be realized. This led, among others, to the fact that the children were required to redo their classification, or get help from others, until the point that the achieved classification is the correct one according to mathematics. The same critique also is valid for those who are or learning to become teachers, who should not be the object of the pedagogical process, of interventions designed by university educators to which the future or current teachers come to be subjected. Instead, a process is truly pedagogical in the context of a theory that recognizes “that the fostering of individual lies in serious and vivid (i.e., creative) activity together with the pupil” ((MIKHAILOV, 1980, p. 170). This is not realized in the Elkonin-Davydov school, “which in reality is more like training” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 35). Mikhailov instead supports the idea and practice of *cultural-educational centers*, which have nothing to do with classes and lessons. In such centers, children and adults are united in single task that are interesting to them. Based on their own choices, children master cultural forms, including handicraft and professions. He concludes that “in this case, ‘learning activity’ as understood by Elkonin and Davydov would cease to exist” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 40). This is so because in these centers, we would be able to observe “living communication and not learning activity of the child in accordance with artificial schemas for mastering the language of the object rather than speech in his own language” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 40).

The form of pedagogical materials Mikhailov prefers include are “literature textbooks with a full ‘basket’ of all the materials needed by teacher

and student” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 42). And he provides examples of “fantastic textbooks” that existed and that his own granddaughter was fortunate to experience. For example, a textbook for six-year olds include poems by A.S. Pushkin, stories by L. n.Tolstoy, the biblical Song of Songs, suras of the Koran, texts from the Buddhist teachings, and stories and poems of authors right up to the present day. The textbooks are not full of “idiotic questions following each verse that without fail kill the ability to appreciate poetry” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 42). They do not contain teachings of metaphor or poetic style but “unobtrusively and covertly allow children to learn for themselves what a metaphor is and what kinds of styles are used in prose and poetry” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 42).

For Vygotsky, there was a primacy of the social in the sense that every higher-psychological function is a societal relation first and personality is the totality of societal relations that an ever-developing person has entertained. The same primacy can be found in Felix Trofimovich’s work from early on. This is quite apparent in his discussion of the experiment A. Meshcheryakov conducted in the Zagorsk boarding school for deaf-blind children, who may cowering in the corner of a room, stay in bed without learning to talk, without learning to eat and drink as children learn to do, and generally without innate intention to process signs or symbols. But in joint action, in doing something together with the teacher, and exchanges with these others, they become persons as every other human being.

The most difficult thing was to separate the action and the external object of the action, to make *the object* something separate and independent from the action. Even the feeling movement of the hand had to become an object of attention, had to be identified and “evaluated” by the child who moved it. It is a point of fundamental interest that this was only possible when such a movement was organised by the teacher as a joint, common action. For example, the hands of the teacher and the pupil had to “find,” take hold of a spoon together, scoop up food together, and carry it to the mouth together. The spoon, the felt shape of it, then becomes a *medium* of intercourse, a means of contact between two people, its objective *symbol*. This common action is directed and controlled by a purposefully acting adult (MIKHAILOV, 1980, p. 260-261).

Thus, something like eating with a spoon first is a social relation before it is something that the child does on his/her own. But it is not just joint work that is required. Instead, the action and the external object of action have to be separated, including the feeling of movement of the hand has to become an object of *joint* attention. It is precisely in this way that the feeling movement is *not the individual's own* but instead becomes an arena for the inter-intra-subjective nature of the human world. The teacher plays an important role because of her corrective feedback that allows each child to find in his/her own movements many actions those that are specific to culture and in which others can identify their own subjectivity. An object such as the spoon becomes inter-intrasubjectively objective because it develops into something separate from the *joint* action, separate from what all participants can feel. That is, the spoon becomes an objective reality for both. In the same way, geometry becomes an objective science in our fragment because the action and the (verbal) account thereof, initially existing *as* the relation, subsequently comes to exist for the child. This central role of the teacher – through whom not only actions and reasons become cultural but also through whom the person becomes itself – is asserted in the societal relation with others:

[T]he object of action, the person with whom I am acting in common, objectively presented to me as helper and critic, who assesses my actions, comparing them with his own (as with a socially significant pattern) and, finally, I myself, acting for him in the same role. Any action that I perform I can therefore evaluate as the action of “another person” and argue with myself as I would with him (MIKHAILOV, 1980, p. 262).

One of the deaf-blind children from the Zagorsk boarding school, having become a university professor herself, eventually notes that “even in the most complex actions I am able to be my own critic mainly because the sum total of historically completed actions lives in me, objectively unfolded in the language of my people” (MIKHAILOV, 1980, p. 264). Here we find a precise statement of what is already noted above: Olga Skorokhodova is enabled to reflect, in her own subjective consciousness, because of the language of her people, just as Gina comes to do mathematics because of the language that is not her own but that of her people. It is in language that consciousness is reflected, always my self-consciousness and the self-consciousness of others. My subjectivity is

always the subjectivity of others as well, or, as Vygotskij (1934, p. 318) notes, “consciousness is reflected in the word as the sun in a droplet of water”. And, as the very last sentence of one of the last texts the scholar worked on, states, “the word that makes sense is a microcosm of consciousness” (VYGOTSKYJ, 1934, p. 318), not just my individual, subjective consciousness, but the consciousness of humanity as a whole. It is here, in each individual word uttered in joint activity that we find “the *externalized* reality of our special, exclusively human inter-intrasubjectivity, which contains the perceived reality of the entire real world outside us” (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 31). Which leads us to end this article with the final sentence of one of the last pieces Felix Trofimovich wrote, which might well have served as his epitaph:

This is the *sensuality*, which we ourselves reproduce and externalize for one another, of all those who *before* us and *together* with us did and do reproduce and purposively change the tension of that semantic-sensual field of our continual addresses to one another, which is sometimes called simply *spiritual*, and sometimes *spiritual-practical*, culture – the high or low culture of our life, our life for one another (MIKHAILOV, 2006b, p. 31).

Chronology of major bibliographic data

Only one of Mikhailov’s several books has been translated into English; it is available online. Available articles are cited below in the reference section.


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