

Making Children into Adults

by *Bernard Schneuwly*

Vygotsky is a major educational theorist credited with showing how the mind of the child is formed. In this book, Pascal Sévérac explains what Vygotsky's theory owes to Spinoza's.

About: Pascal Sévérac, *Puissance de l'enfance: Vygotski avec Spinoza*. Paris, Libraire philosophique J. Vrin, 2022, 245p., 25 €.

Pascal Sévérac's *Puissance de l'enfance: Vygotski avec Spinoza* (The power of childhood: Vygotsky with Spinoza) profoundly enriches the interpretation of Vygotsky, an author who, along with Paulo Freire, is a major reference in educational sciences. As Sévérac points out, Vygotsky allows (at least theoretically) to overcome two dominant conceptions in the field of education: "pedagogical populism," according to which the child develops in a continuous process, spontaneously, and following his or her own laws; and "the aristocracy of knowledge" (p. 15), which posits that the development of the pupil is radically affected by knowledge from the outside. Vygotsky, writes Sévérac, enables us to think continuity and rupture together.

The subtitle of the book, "Vygotsky with Spinoza," is doubly justified. On the one hand, Vygotsky worked continuously on the basis of— "with" —Spinoza; he drew on the latter's thought to found his monistic anthropology, he later reframed it to develop a theory of emotions, and he even attempted to give it a scientific basis. On the other hand, Sévérac, himself a specialist in Spinoza, revisits Vygotsky—"with Spinoza"—by offering an original reading of some of his key concepts in the light of the philosopher's thought.

Vygotsky and the Development of the Child

Born in 1896, Vygotsky worked as a teacher trainer and literary critic before launching his academic career in the USSR in 1924, where he specialized in defectology, pedology, and psychology. He died of tuberculosis in 1934. His work comprises over 200 texts, including *The Psychology of Art*, *The History of the Development of Higher Mental Functions*, *Pedology of the Adolescent*, *Thinking and Speech*, or *The Teaching about Emotions*.

According to Vygotsky, the specifically human capacities—that is, the higher mental functions—are historical-social constructs. All human activity is mediated by an instrument (a tool or sign) that interposes itself between the subject and the object and that fundamentally transforms the structure of the relationship between them. Vygotsky's basic idea is that the sign is an instrument that allows to act on others and on oneself, and thus to master one's own behavior and mental functions. The structure of the mind and the personality as a whole evolve by forming increasingly complex functions and systems of functions.

Vygotsky describes this process using genetic analysis. He identifies its key stages, noting that these are separated by crises and ruptures: Completely new forms of memory, attention, action, and thought are constructed and more and more consciously mastered in profoundly remodeled systems. The genetic principle underlying these systems is the internalization of social relationships through which the individual adopts cultural behaviors underpinned by sign systems. Even the most individual mind is therefore profoundly social: Human essence is created through relationships with the world and with society. Human development thus conceived in its essence is particularly complex because it merges two lines of development: physiological maturation and cultural construction. However, this development is above all artificial, the product of educational interventions—particularly teaching—that help to create zones of proximal development.

From Thinking to Affect: A Journey with Spinoza

Sévérac explores in his book several aspects of Vygotskian theory, which are only briefly summarized here. The first part of the book elucidates the interweaving of the two lines of human development. Sévérac shows that, for Vygotsky, cultural

development does not entail the unfolding of a predetermined program—it is not natural, unlike what was argued by the psychological theorists of his time—but a constant transformation. This process, which Sévérac contrasts to the Hegelian and Piagetian conceptions of human development, is as much the product of a self-movement as it is the result of an educational cultural effort described by Sévérac as a “self-other movement.”

Having established the general characteristics of Vygotskian anthropology, Sévérac discusses, in the second part of the book, “the cognitive activity of the child” in the light of Spinoza’s thought. He describes the process of concept formation from infancy to adulthood, as analyzed by Vygotsky in his book *Thinking and Speech*. He then shows that this process—syncretic thinking, thinking in complexes, thinking in concepts—can be compared to and illuminated by the kinds of knowledge identified by Spinoza—transcendental terms, universal notions of the imagination (first kind), universal notions of reason (second kind). Conversely, Vygotsky’s analysis of concept formation allows “to perceive what might be overlooked” in Spinoza, and even to better understand the philosopher’s conception of the third kind of knowledge, intuitive science (p. 123). This leads Sévérac to offer original formulations in which the thoughts of the two authors are intimately intertwined:

While [in the child’s development] the imagination moves from the bottom to the top as it becomes more intellectual, the intellect moves from the top to the bottom as it becomes more imaginative—one witnesses a rationalization of the imaginary and an imagination of the rational (p. 104).¹

The third part of the book, “La puissance affective de la pensée,” (The Affective Power of Thinking), begins by tackling the question of the ever-changing relationship between thinking (generalization) and speech (communication). As Sévérac recalls, Vygotsky defined a basic unit—the word and its meaning—that makes it possible to grasp the concrete mechanisms of this relationship and to trace its development via the internalization of language, that is, via the constitution of a form of inner speech or verbal thought—a thought that can unfold outside any concrete situation or action.

¹ These formulations reflect the contradictory unity between thinking and imagination described by Vygotsky in “Imagination and Creativity in Childhood.” Vygotsky borrows from Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebook* the metaphor of the zigzag, where the zig is the imagination that detaches us from reality and the zag is the thinking that brings us back to it. For further details, see Bernard Schneuwly, “‘Tout ce qui peut être imaginé est réel.’ L’évolution de la conception du rapport entre imagination et réel chez Vygotskij,” in Bernard Schneuwly, Irina Lepoldoff Martin, Daniele Nunes Henrique Silva (eds), *L.S. Vygotskij, Imagination. Textes choisis. Avec des commentaires et des essais sur l’imagination dans l’œuvre de Vygotskij*, Bruxelles, Peter Lang, 2022, pp. 381-402.

Through a systematic comparison of Vygotsky's analyses with Spinoza's reflections, Sévérac reframes the transformation of the relationship between speech and thinking that occurs as the child develops into adulthood. His approach is well illustrated by the following passage: "Insofar as words are bodily affections, assembling and linking words according to the order of the intellect (*secundum ordinem ad intellectum*) amounts to composing a discourse (a "rain of words" [to use Vygotsky's expression]) capable of linguistically realizing an adequate idea, that is, a thought rich in simultaneous plurality" (p. 155). This passage points to another of the Spinozian ideas at the root of Vygotskian anthropology—the unity of body and mind:

"Dialectical psychology," writes Vygotsky, "proceeds first of all from the unity of mental and physiological processes. Because for dialectical psychology mind is not, in the words of Spinoza, something that is situated outside nature or as a kingdom within a kingdom" (Vygotsky, quoted by Sévérac, p. 193).

Consciousness as the Lived Experience of Lived Experiences

From this perspective, how can we approach the problem that has been at the heart of Vygotsky's work from the very beginning, namely that of consciousness? For Vygotsky, consciousness has no existence of its own, which seems to contradict the monist position he shares with Spinoza; rather, its specificity lies in a structure he describes as "the lived experience of lived experiences." Sévérac explains Vygotsky's concept of lived experience—or *perezhivanie*²—through an original interpretation of a text that has often been commented on in the secondary literature: "The Problem of the Environment."³ In this text, Vygotsky shows how the "same environment"—a violent alcoholic mother—is refracted in profoundly different ways in the lived experience of three children: This environment is in fact not the same for the children and influences each of them differently. This leads Sévérac to argue that "lived experience" corresponds to Spinoza's concept of affect, understood as a "variation in psychophysical power produced by an encounter with an external causality" (p. 206).

² English translations of Vygotsky's early texts typically translate *perezhivanie* as "experience," when in fact it should be translated as "lived experience." While translations of his later texts (published after 1932) generally retain the original Russian term, the shift in terminology is unfortunate as it prevents English readers from grasping the evolution of the concept in Vygotskian thought.

³ Rene Van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner (eds), *The Vygotsky Reader*, Cambridge, Blackwell, 1994, pp. 338-354.

Lived experience—or affect in the Spinozian sense—can become ever more clearly the object of lived experience itself. Borrowing simultaneously from Vygotsky and Spinoza, Sévérac puts it in these terms:

While inadequate—passive and partial—consciousness can be a reflex reflexivity based on a single lived experience, adequate—active and total—consciousness is necessarily a reflexive reflexivity based on multiple lived experiences (pp. 218-220).

Readers familiar with Vygotsky will undeniably gain from reading Sévérac's book, a few highlights of which I have outlined here. Indeed, the book allows to take a fresh look at some of the key concepts in Vygotsky's work: The process of concept formation appears in a new light; the understanding of the relationship between thinking and speech is deepened through its reframing "with Spinoza"; the dialectical conception of psychology as the unity of the physical and the mental, which is particularly well developed in Vygotsky's pedagogical works, acquires a solid philosophical foundation; and Spinoza's theory of affects becomes a tool for elucidating the complex articulation between consciousness, intellect, and affections evoked by the Vygotskian concept of lived experience.

However, it is regrettable that, in a book on the power of childhood, little attention is paid to Vygotsky's pedagogical work, namely his analyses of the child's development through crisis and ruptures; for instance, one finds no systematic discussion of the period of transition, adolescence, during which the process of concept formation leads to the emergence of the psychological system. While the relationship between teaching (*obuchat*) and development ("artificial development," as Vygotsky puts it) is addressed in the book, there is little attempt to systematize it. The Marxian influence on Vygotskian thought⁴ is not mentioned at all, even though it is omnipresent—for instance, in the critique of Piaget, whom Vygotsky accused of overlooking real practice in the construction of knowledge. Despite this caveat, *Puissance de l'enfance* is a most welcome book that opens up new avenues of reflection while allowing to deepen the reading and interpretation of Vygotsky's work.

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⁴ See Lucien Sève, "Où est Marx dans l'œuvre de Vygotski ?" Conférence au 7^e Séminaire international Vygotskij, Geneva, 20-22 June 2018.