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Introduction

This book is a response to the claim that Vygotsky holds abstract rationality as the pinnacle of thought. The claim is based on the belief that Vygotsky subscribed to what is referred to as the ‘Enlightenment project’. The book aims to show that Vygotsky had a far more sophisticated appreciation both of reason and of its remit than this fashionable characterisation implies. Its argument is developed through an exploration of some aspects of the philosophy of Hegel and Spinoza, to both of whom Vygotsky acknowledges a debt. In the dominant, predominantly psychological research literature, the nature of the philosophical underpinnings of Vygotsky’s work tends to receive little attention. Not only is that neglect contested here, but the argument is carried a stage further, claiming that the limitations that critics see in Vygotsky’s work are based on misapprehensions of his understanding of reason. In support of this it is argued that Hegel’s investigation of the presuppositions of claims to knowledge already contains a critique of the frame of reference used by these commentators – commentators who view Vygotsky, in this aspect of his work, as having an ‘old-fashioned’ conception of reason that cannot do justice to diversity.

A recurring theme of this book is Vygotsky’s conception of the nature of abstract reason, but such are the ramifications of this that it is necessary to go well beyond an examination of any particular aspect of Vygotsky’s work. Vygotsky was concerned above all with questions of education. While education may appear to be non-philosophical and certainly to lie outside the range of what most philosophers write about, it has, by virtue of its direct involvement with thought and intellect, a philosophical dimension. As education leads towards philosophy, so philosophy can gain from an engagement with education, precisely because the latter is not only engaged with questions of mind and world but engaged with them in a real and practical sense.
It was Piaget, with his genetic epistemology, who brought the study of the development of faculties into direct contact with philosophy. Vygotsky, Piaget’s contemporary, appreciated that any inquiry on the part of philosophy into the nature of mind and world could not be separated from the study of the mind in its development. Those familiar with Vygotsky’s work will appreciate the extent of his influence within education and also be aware of the debates about pedagogy and knowledge that his work has generated. Accordingly, although this book focuses on the question of abstract reason in Vygotsky, it concludes by illustrating how the philosophical tradition that inspired Vygotsky has significant implications for these debates.

While Vygotsky was explicit about the importance of philosophy for theory, he did not actually spell out the philosophy that informed his argument, yet this omission, if this is how it is to be judged, does not detract from the subtlety and sophistication of his approach. The dualism of the ideal and real, of mind and world, that has underpinned criticism of Vygotsky both in his own time and in the current period has been taken up not only by his follower Evald Ilyenkov, but also by contemporary analytical philosophers. David Bakhurst has written on this directly: in claiming normativity to be a necessary element of the sociogenesis of mind, he has brought to our attention links between the philosophy of John McDowell and Ilyenkov. For modern philosophy the questions requiring careful analysis concern empiricism and knowing. The two contemporary philosophers whose work is most important in this book have both taken a Hegelian approach to make explicit points, which, though unexpressed, are necessarily assumed in the forms of argument that they analyse. In *Mind and World* McDowell addresses the problem of how a separate mind can connect with a world by working through a number of highly developed arguments about how we come to know. His enquiries lead to the unusual conclusion that, rather than possessing the means of thought solely in one’s head, ‘the dictates of reason are there [in the world] anyway, whether or not one’s eyes are open to them’ (McDowell, 1996, p. 91). Following Wilfrid Sellars, he refers to this sphere as ‘The Space of Reasons’.

For McDowell and also for Robert Brandom, the other contemporary philosopher whose work I shall highlight, this concept plays a crucial role. Simply summarised, the gist of the argument is that in order to make a claim of knowing we are not, as commonly thought, giving a description of an event but placing our claims about it in a space of reasons – that is to say, making claims on the basis of knowing what follows from them and what it is necessary to assume in order to make them in the first place. Where a word is used without the user being aware of its conceptual connections to other concepts, these connections are still present. The implication of Brandom’s argument is that context, not simply conscious intention, imparts reason. This approach, which results from bringing a Kantian argument to bear upon a Humean residue in empiricist conceptions of knowledge, identifies human knowing as fundamentally different from the ‘knowing’ of machines. For example, a human shout of ‘Fire!’ is fundamentally different as far as general awareness is concerned from the *differential response* of a fire alarm, though both are an alert to the same danger. For Brandom, what is distinctive about human beings is the ability to operate...
in the light of reasons rather than to respond simply to causes. McDowell refers to this as our second nature, emphasising our being human as something other than pure matter yet still part of nature.

When the distinction between the human and the natural is dualistically drawn as a distinction of mind and world, a clear boundary exists between the conceptual (mind) and the nonconceptual (nature). Such a distinction exists for Kant, but for McDowell, who adopts a Hegelian standpoint in *Mind and World* and speaks of the ‘unboundedness of the conceptual’, it is fundamentally misconceived. McDowell rejects the separation of mind and world underlying so much philosophy in favour of a frame of thought in which reasons exist in the world that humans have developed. In adopting this frame of thought McDowell takes up a position similar to Vygotsky’s. For both, mind is social and to give an account of mindedness and intellect it is necessary to look beyond the individual and to attend to external mediation in the formation of higher mental functions.

The arguments of McDowell, Brandom, Sellars, Bakhurst and, with them, Vygotsky cast a distinctive light on rationality and reason. In their hands these concepts take on quite a different shape from the mainstream of philosophical thought that comes through Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant down to modern analytical philosophy. To give a bare outline, a once prevailing view in analytical philosophy presents rationality as abstract and decontextualised: it relies on the idea that reason is separated from the world and can be applied to it with greater or lesser degrees of adequacy. When applied to education such a position can lead to the most extreme forms of formalised teaching.

It is beyond the remit of this book to begin to spell out the many practical implications of the philosophical issues it considers. However, one topic must be mentioned that confirms that there are such implications and that these are of crucial importance. This is the way ‘abstract’ reason has been made the culprit for the poverty of educational practice in mass schooling. McDowell’s claim that receptivity – our experience of the world through our senses – is already ‘conceptual’ involves a conception of reason quite different from that with which critics such as James Wertsch quite correctly take issue – the extreme of a decontextualised schooled knowledge, presented without regard to its genetic development or any sense that learning involves actualising concepts. This matter of decontextualisation is taken up in Chapter 2, which presents the critique of Vygotsky’s alleged abstract rationalism and considers the theory of situated cognition which has been proposed in its place.

Chapter 3 turns to ‘constructivism’, which plays a central role in much post-Vygotskian thought. Criticism here is directed against what is argued to be the ‘representationalist paradigm’ implicit in conceptions of the active construction of meaning into a bare ‘given’. It is argued that constructivism leads to particular pedagogic strategies that, though not part of a more sophisticated analysis, are influential in the rhetoric of classroom practice, specifically the undermining of the authority of the teacher, of knowledge (in texts) and of the belief that knowledge is a matter of plurality in the sense that no one approach is superior to any other.
Chapter 4 uses the debate between Vygotsky and Piaget on conscious awareness, egocentrism and development to illustrate the differences between their philosophical backgrounds. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the different philosophical presuppositions of each author lead to different theoretical positions.

Chapter 5 turns to elements of Spinoza’s philosophy that influenced Vygotsky. In particular it is concerned with Spinoza’s formulation of knowing in terms of a holism of one substance of which everything is a part, as opposed to a dualism that assumes fundamental separations. Spinoza’s approach leads to a conception of truth not as an attribute but as an actualisation of a process understood as many-sided. From this standpoint, freedom appears quite differently from the Cartesian conception of wilful agency. It is understood as self-determination: to be free is to be the cause of oneself rather than subject to external causes, and this depends upon ‘adequate ideas’.

Chapter 6 turns to Hegel, who follows a similar approach to Spinoza, progressively ‘exorcising’ claims to know to reach a distinctive conception of knowing. This conception, rather than being based on secure foundations, sees new knowledge arising out of a working through of existing claims to knowledge to show that more is implicated than appears initially to be the case.

Chapter 7 considers this anti-foundationalist character of the philosophy of Spinoza, Hegel and Vygotsky in order to argue that the conception of reason central to Vygotsky’s work bears no relation to the caricature of abstract rationality criticised by contemporary post-Vygotskian researchers.

This order is not a linear sequence as the criticisms levelled against situated cognition and constructivism in Chapters 2 and 3 presuppose philosophical ideas that are not discussed until Chapters 5 and 6. On the other hand, those philosophical ideas would not make sense in the context of this book without an examination of post-Vygotskian research. Furthermore, it must be stressed that the later chapters are intended only to address those parts of Spinoza and Hegel that are relevant for understanding Vygotsky’s work. The aims of this book are: first, to show that Vygotsky was influenced by a different tradition of philosophy from that which has influenced post-Vygotskian research; and second, to demonstrate that this difference is significant and has implications for educational practice.

Apart from the complexities of the differences between the philosophical traditions, there is the additional difficulty that neither Vygotsky nor post-Vygotskian researchers spell out their philosophical presuppositions in detail. Vygotsky, it is true, acknowledged the philosophic influence on his thinking, and it is often only a matter of following the leads he gave to find his sources. With his commentators, however, things are much less clear and the scope for attributing to them positions they do not hold is necessarily that much greater. But it must be stressed that the criticisms made of various works of commentary on Vygotsky for failure to appreciate the significance of the philosophical traditions in which he was working stop far short of denying the value of the contribution of those traditions to the understanding of the nature of reason.
NOTES
1 Bakhurst’s *The Formation of Reason* (2011) offers an original defence of a sociohistorical account of mind that utilises the work of all the thinkers here mentioned, especially McDowell.

REFERENCES