Moses on his way to the promised land: On Vygotsky’s Notebooks

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Abstract
The publication of a voluminous selection of notebooks from the Vygotsky Family Archive represents a major event for the Vygotsky studies. The material provided in the book turns out to be truly novel; it reaches far beyond mere compilations of existing texts, reprints, and (re-)translations. The key question we address in our contribution is: does this newly made available material have a significant impact on our understanding of Vygotsky’s life and work? We first offer a rough summary of the book’s content, then indicate what readers may expect from the Notebooks and what they will not find there; and finally, we focus on Vygotsky’s early quest for his own Jewishness and on the shift toward systemic and semiotic thinking that marks the last years of his life.

Keywords
Lev S. Vygotsky, Vygotsky studies, history of psychology, Soviet Union, Judaism, semiotics

Once, there was a young and unknown schoolteacher named Lev S. Vygotsky who lived in the provincial town of Gomel. Like a bolt out of the blue, he entered the field of psychology and gave what seemed to have been breathtaking talks at the All-Russian Congress of Pedology, Experimental Pedagogy, and Psychoneurology in Petrograd in early 1924, which earned him a position at Konstantin N. Kornilov’s Institute of Psychology at the Moscow State University. There, he soon made friends with Alexander R.
Luria and Alexei N. Leontiev founding a soon-to-become famous “Troika,” inseparable in research and daily life. Together, they designed fascinating experiments, constructed revolutionary theories, did important practical work, and bravely resisted various political pressures. Unfortunately, the most brilliant of them, Vygotsky, died much too early (from tuberculosis at the age of 37), but his golden legacy lives on, down to the present. Some of his followers called him a “genius” (see, for example, Cole et al., 2006, p. 38), and a well-known reviewer, the philosopher Stephen Toulmin, has not hesitated to refer to him as the Mozart of psychology (Toulmin, 1978), whatever the comparison with the composer of *The Magic Flute* might have actually meant. (And why Mozart, for that matter, rather than Franz Schubert, Frédéric Chopin, or Jim Morrison?)

There is no doubt that Vygotsky was an exceptional figure in psychology. But, as one may easily guess, the brief narrative sketched above belongs to the “Cinderella-type accounts” (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 12)—stories for children that insult adults’ intelligence (Blanck, 2001, p. 18)—and, we might add, also that of children. At any rate, the recent past has witnessed a revisionist turn in the study of Lev Vygotsky’s life and work.

A rapid look at Vygotsky studies suggests that the revisionist turn happened following two waves of reception of this figure of Soviet research. The onset of the first coincided with the Soviet thaw that followed Khrushchev’s secret speech to the Communist Party in 1956. The second, now on the international level, followed and resulted from the publication of *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1978) and the publication of the collected works first in Russian (1982–1984) and then in English translation (1987–1999). Among the ruins of the Soviet Union, finally, began a fresh, but now eagerly revisionist, transnational approach to both Vygotsky’s work and life (Yasnitsky, 2018; Yasnitsky et al., 2016; Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2015). This revisionist trend aimed at questioning seemingly well-established myths by means of philological and historical inquiries. Keeping in mind these developments and shifts, we should welcome the publication of Vygotsky’s *Notebooks* edited by Ekaterina Zavershneva and René van der Veer (in Russian in 2017 and one year later in English translation; Vygotsky, 2018). The *Notebooks* do indeed contain new material regarding Vygotsky’s thinking, research practices, experimental design, subsequent development of ideas, reflections on unsatisfactory hypotheses, and mental preparation for debates with other significant figures in academia and on public arenas.

With respect to the *Notebooks*, we address one issue: does this newly available archival material induce yet another revision of our, your, or anybody’s understanding of Vygotsky’s work, or is it likely—considering the material’s *real novelty* and its being worldwide available—to significantly impact the course of Vygotsky studies? Or, put differently, does this source invite a new revision of one’s view of Vygotsky’s work or does it merely complement established interpretations notwithstanding the noticeable differences between traditionally minded and revisionist strands of reception?

**A rough summary of the content**

In addition to a short preface, an orienting introduction, and author and subject indices, the book contains 29 chapters that range from 5 (Chapter 14: “Observing Asya”) to 36 pages.
(Chapter 7: “From the Zakharino Hospital”) and whose titles were added by the editors. More than a third of the 523 pages of the book consists of introductory remarks on the respective notebooks, as well as explanatory notes and references.

The first four chapters (“A tragicomedy of strivings,” “Jewry and world history,” “The book of fragments,” and “The Jewish question”) clearly belong to Vygotsky’s “pre-psychological period” that ran from 1912 to 1922. (Throughout this review, we follow the periodization in the editors’ introduction.) They contain material related to religious topics in general and Judaism in particular. However, as far as Jewishness is concerned, the documents by no means focus exclusively upon aspects of spirituality and also address historical and political issues.

Chapter 5, “Genres of writing,” refers to Vygotsky’s turn to psychology. It contains material for his thesis on the psychology of art, which turns out to be a curious blend of literary and psychological analyses. This chapter, along with Chapter 6, “The trip to London” (via Germany), centers on Vygotsky’s “reactological” period (1923–1925). This trip, his only travel outside the borders of the Soviet Union, concerned his interest in defectology.

The next three chapters allow one to observe how from 1926 to 1929 Vygotsky and his colleagues elaborated the “instrumental” approach. This span of time coincided (or rather began) with a physical, mental, and scientific crisis, documented in Chapter 7, “From the Zakharino Hospital.” Vygotsky spent several months in this hospital, to which he had been admitted for treatment of his tuberculosis. There, he wrote his (later famous) reflections on the crisis of psychology. Chapter 8, “Toward cultural-historical theory,” and Chapter 9, “The instrumental method,” both address the notion of sign as a means of inter- and intraindividual mediation to be stressed in experimental research and theory building.

A sort of “transitional period” follows, documented in the notes dating from 1930 to 1931. These notes introduce the “systemic principle” (Chapters 10 to 12: “Concepts and the systemic approach,” “The anomalous development of the child,” and “From the EDI Clinic”). Instead of analyzing the development of mental functions one by one, Vygotsky’s notes draw one’s attention to the interplay of mental functions and emphasize the impact of speech.

Virtually all of the rest of the book—from Chapter 13, “Spinoza and the problem of higher emotions,” to Chapter 29, “The rest is silence,” concerns Vygotsky’s “theory of dynamic semantic systems and the psychology of experience,” which he elaborated from 1932 to 1934. The year 1932 seems to have been an annus mirabilis in psychology—remember that it saw the publication of Remembering by Frederic Charles Bartlett and Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men by Edward Chace Tolman. For our author, the same year was also particularly relevant: from then on, Vygotsky tried to reorient his and his colleagues’ research toward the role of sense and meaning for the science of psychology itself. Not all members of the “Vygotsky Circle” participated in this reorientation. Indeed, Leontiev was not convinced of the plausibility of the new way of doing psychological research. “The science of psychology itself” encompasses both the study of “normal” development and that of “Disintegration and schizophrenia” (Chapter 20), “Neuropsychology” (Chapter 26), and “Difficult children” (Chapter 27). Significant parts of Vygotsky’s Thinking and speech can be found in these notebook chapters—either in
sketchy outlines or in their final or near-final form (see Chapter 21, “Thinking and speech”). “The problem of consciousness” (Chapter 17) appears again but now from the standpoint of sense and meaning. Vygotsky was thus obviously motivated to reflect again and again upon what he called “the semic method,” which corresponds to the title of Chapter 18. The role of sense and meaning is also further elaborated in a critical reception of some works by Kurt Lewin, whom Vygotsky met in Moscow (see Chapter 25, “The semantic field: sparring with Lewin”).

Some general remarks

Vygotsky is far from being an easy author, as those who have studied his texts know all too well. The *Notebooks* in no way constitute an exception; rather, they are particularly challenging. The editors provide welcome annotations that partly clarify terminological issues and partly puzzles of translation. In addition, they offer bibliographical, biographical, and historical information without which one would often lose one’s orientation in the vast labyrinth of Vygotsky’s thoughts.

As for their content, the *Notebooks* contain entries of various size: more or less elaborate texts, short or very short remarks, elliptical sentences, more or less extended sketches, numbered theses, outlines of talks to be given, notes on discussions and informal conversations, and lists of names and addresses (mainly of colleagues and students). The readers are thus confronted with incompletely elaborated thoughts written down—something that might approach Vygotsky’s own internal monologue.

What can readers expect from the *Notebooks*? Reading them might show something about Vygotsky’s way of thinking at different times of his life. Since the book opens with a manuscript from 1912 (implying that Vygotsky wrote it at the age of fifteen or sixteen) and ends with texts from the first six months of 1934 (just before he died), one gets impressions both of what topics had recurrent relevance to Vygotsky and of more or less dramatic shifts in his approach. Or, if you prefer, the *Notebooks* offer the reader rich material for a longitudinal $N = 1$ study into the genesis of psychological theories and related topics. You also encounter stylistic peculiarities of Vygotsky’s writings and you symbolically meet persons who belonged—again at different times—to the (perhaps inaptly) so-called Vygotsky Circle. Thus, tensions, conflicts, and mutual criticism within a group of people relating to one another as researchers, colleagues, and/or friends can at least be noticed, if not fully grasped. Let us remark that political matters also are raised in the *Notebooks*, which illustrate how Vygotsky tried to resist Stalinist purges and how he perceived social life in the USSR. This is especially evident in the passages that deal with case histories, whether of schizophrenic patients (Chapter 20, “Disintegration and schizophrenia”), neuropsychological conditions (Chapter 26, “Neuropsychology”), or so-called difficult children (Chapter 27, “Difficult children”). As for the last, the editors highlight that “the 9 case histories gathered in this chapter show that the Soviet Union was not yet the socialist paradise that its leaders wanted it to be: Homeless children were roaming the streets; millions of people died from hunger; housing conditions in the cities were appalling; and the country had its fair share of problem families, alcoholic parents, domestic violence, and so on.” (p. 437; see also Mecacci [2019] on the phenomenon of
bezprizorniki or beznadzorniki—children without guardians.) Proctor (2020) has recently published an instructive reconstruction of Alexander Luria’s scientific and practical activities—activities that partly reflected his patients’ complex social reality. In addition, we refer to Vygotsky’s work at the “Toy Committee of the Narkompros of the RSFSR,” which highlights the policy of supposedly ideal Soviet toy design (see Chapter 28, “The playing child”).

And what will readers not find in the Notebooks? “Vygotsky the person” remains a more or less vague shadow accompanying the researcher in the places in Moscow and elsewhere where he did research. For example, his family plays hardly any role and there is little or nothing on his sympathies and antipathies, fears, or joyous moments. This does not mean, however, that the “personal aspect” remains hidden throughout. For example, Chapter 6, “The trip to London,” is of particular interest because it depicts a somehow timid and anxious Vygotsky who nevertheless deeply misses his wife Roza and is shown to be proud of the Soviet Union. The Notebooks sometimes convey vivid descriptions of the social reality of Vygotsky’s country, yet the author’s opinions regarding day-to-day politics are not very explicit; nor does one learn much about his overall assessment of the major course of sociopolitical action in the USSR. A remarkable characteristic of Vygotsky’s “scientific persona” ought to be mentioned: his messianic, prophetic, or quasi-religious conviction that he and his collaborators were actually promoting something of revolutionary value for the science of psychology and that they needed to fiercely persevere in carrying out their mission. The last chapter offers some evidence for this messianic outlook: indeed, Vygotsky compares himself with Moses. “This is the last thing I have done in psychology, and I will die at the summit like Moses, having glimpsed the promised land but without setting foot in it.” (Chapter 29: “The rest is silence,” here: p. 497) some of his letters also underscore the conviction of being moved by a messianic task (see, for example, Vygotsky’s letter to Leontiev, July 23, 1929 in Vygotskij, 2009, pp. 235–238). Until the end of his life, he hesitated to name his and his colleagues’ approach to psychology; occasionally calling it “height psychology,” he even suggested the name of “acmeist psychology” (p. 292). The editors note that the denotation refers to the Greek word ακμή, which translates as “peak” or “zenith,” thus equating “acmeist psychology” with “height psychology” (n. 6, p. 303). There possibly lingers an interesting connotation: AKMEIZM (akmeizm) also denotates a Russian modernist poetic current that emerged around 1912 in opposition to the literary school of symbolism with Anna Akhamatova and Osip Mandelstam as its paradigmatic representatives. Vygotsky quotes or alludes to the latter’s poems in his writings on a number of occasions and was, moreover, personally acquainted with the Mandelstams (see p. 267).

In the remainder of this review, we are going to consider more closely some topics of the Notebooks. These topics are related to “Vygotsky the Jew” and to “Vygotsky the systemic thinker and semiotician.”

**Vygotsky the Jew**

The chapters dealing explicitly with the status of Russian Jewry as well as with Vygotsky’s reflections on his own religious and social identity are not at all untypical or
even unique for people of his era. Russian anti-Semitism had been ferocious since the 1880s. There was an ongoing controversy in Jewish communities between those favoring Hebrew as the national language for a Jewry without a land, who thus lacked the otherwise accepted status of a nation, and those who promoted Yiddish as the modern idiom for the progressive yet still uncertain nature of a “national” Jewry. And though the First World War’s end was approaching for the Russian empire (if not yet for Western Europe), it had a tremendous sociopolitical and economic impact on both Russian gentiles and Jews. Vygotsky was well aware of these critical historical moments, as well as the religious, theological, and ideological conflicts within his community. Some quotes from Chapters 2 to 4 will likely illustrate Vygotsky’s quest for his definition of his Jewishness: “The fact that I am a Jew gives me mystic inner experiences that have their roots in the remote past and are connected by invisible threads with the suprarational and transcendental life of the people’s soul in its past and present; it gives me an inner grievous mentality, ‘the seal of the living God,’ and I always experience and feel that I am ‘marked,’ that I am a Jew!” (p. 12; Vygotsky’s emphasis) The notion of individual Jewishness as applied to himself expressed itself in Vygotsky’s proposition that “the fact that I am a Jew is, I repeat, absolutely irrational.” This irrational—transparently evident, non-arguable, and lived—fact of Jewishness contrasts with attempts at either reforming or modernizing Jewish life: “And so ‘with the help of positivistic, i.e., sociologically flavored philosophy,’ Jewish history is built on a ‘bio-sociological foundation’ ... to give it strength and stability, because, as they [authors whom Vygotsky opposed] see no support on earth, in history, and are not able to ascend the idea to the pre-historical and supra-historical, they fear for it and it seems to them illusory.” (ibid.; Vygotsky’s emphasis) Thus, “[c]ontemporary scientific historiography objects to the ‘theological view of Jewish history’ as a theory of the predetermination of the historical process, whereas a genuine scientific worldview not only does not contradict this belief in and conviction of predetermination but accepts it as an essential part ... The whole future is the result of a process of combining existing forces and movements and this combination is already predetermined.” (ibid.) These quotes show that Vygotsky was, indeed, looking for some possible intellectual practice that would allow him to capture theoretically what he experienced as authentic Jewishness: otherwise, he would not have distinguished between his contemporaries’ scientific, historico-sociological approach to Jewishness and what he called a “genuine scientific worldview.” (We shall refer back to these passages below.)

The chapters under consideration also show that Vygotsky was seriously planning a book on the issue of Jewishness in general as well as his Jewishness in particular as this note reveals: “The book must be as much about me as it is about others. Its preface must be if not a testament then something in that spirit. On the whole, Gogol (I just read this one idea, nothing else) gave me much for the book: his superior view on the present, the link with himself, the spirit, style, tone, form of the book.” (p. 45; Vygotsky’s emphasis)

Vygotsky’s fragments of drafts or remarks and occasional quotes reveal his seemingly insatiable curiosity about matters philosophical, historical, religious, and literary—that is, for various and occasionally contradictory sources of inspiration, further investigation, rejection, or criticism. The eclectic character of the notes collected for the four chapters on Jewishness thus testifies to his as yet unending search for a not only necessary but also
sufficient self-definition as Jew, as the following two quotes amply corroborate: “Make mention of the circle, which was inspired by the reflection about the fate and meaning of the Jews, about our generation, oneself, the searching for one’s destiny. This is the spirit of the book. It brought me many things.” (p. 46; Vygotsky’s emphasis) and “I cannot reconcile the historical in Christianity with Christ. There is no history in Christianity—no mankind, church, proper [cause; added by the Notebooks’ editors]. It is ideology (Hegel: a very noble impulse of the human spirit, etc.). Jewry: the reality of the divine in Jewish history, a fact of the history of the Jews. The Jewish religion is no ideology but the fate of a living people; the Jewish religion is the Jewish history. God’s hand is Providence in history.” (ibid.; Vygotsky’s emphasis)

Vygotsky seems to have chosen his sources more or less randomly. That is to say, he picked what he needed from what he was reading, whatever its nature might be: treatises containing quotations that interested him, authentic sources written in Russian or Hebrew or German, etc. It is no wonder, then, that the bibliographical information conveyed in the Notebooks is vague, incomplete, or nonexistent. Thankfully, the editors have provided information to complement that omitted or only partly given by Vygotsky: “In writing these introductions and notes, they [sc. the Notebooks’ editors] relied on the usual encyclopedias (notably, Wikipedia), read scores of articles and books by Vygotsky and his contemporaries, and were especially pleased with the existence of digitalized older books.” (p. v) But even on the basis of the introductions and notes, several points remain unsettled.

Vygotsky thus took verbatim an expression from Otto Bauer’s treatise on the issue of nationality and social democracy, a lengthy monograph published in Vienna in 1907. This is how the Notebooks read (p. 12, Vygotsky’s emphasis): “The nation is the historical in us (the Historische in uns), <…> the historical in us is the nationality in us, says Otto Bauer … .” The editors reference the just-mentioned monograph; however, they seem to not have noticed that the expression “das Historische in uns” occurs twice in Bauer’s book (on page 122 and again on 125) but not on page 108, where the equivalent expression occurs in the English translation (“... the historical within us ...”), as well as on page 110 (“...the historical within us ...”) (see Bauer, 2000).

Vygotsky’s use of this particular source raises some questions whose answers will need further elaboration—something that may never happen if the original documents turn out to have been destroyed or are insufficiently explicit. One could say that Bauer was a historical materialist firmly convinced that economic progress would not only improve everybody’s life but also promote the feeling of one’s belonging to one’s nation. Vygotsky, however, did not share such a view, as the quotes above show. Now, did he take Bauer’s expression from a non-Bauerian source? Did he truly absorb Bauer’s book (which also includes an extensive chapter on the Jewish question), and if he did absorb the book’s contents, or a large part of it, why did he quote the expression affirmatively yet (directly or indirectly) reject without further comment an approach to the history of Jewry that contradicted his own?

Take another example. Vygotsky rejected the politics of assimilation that was promoted by some of his contemporaries in Russia and elsewhere. In doing so, he misattributed a quote to Moses Mendelssohn: “And Mendelssohn with his ‘be a man in the
street and a Jew at home.’ This is separating the man and the Jew.” (p. 30) The editors correctly note (n. 62, p. 38) that Vygotsky was mistaken concerning Mendelssohn, but then misrepresent the origin of the sentence “be a man ....” They maintain that “‘Sei ein Mensch in den Strassen und ein Jude zu Hause!’ (‘Be a man in the street and a Jew at home!’) has often been attributed to Mendelssohn but actually comes from Yehudah Leib Gordon’s poem ‘Erwache, mein Volk!’ (‘Wake up, my people!’) (1863).” This poem was originally written in Hebrew, not in German, and as far as we know has never been translated into German. Its title is Hakitsah Ami (for an English translation, see Stanislavski, 1988, pp. 49–50); the phrase quoted by Vygotsky is in the penultimate stanza.

Another point, and a riddle. After 1917, the Notebooks no longer address Jewishness, whether traditional or self-modernizing, religious or secular, Zionist or otherwise. However, there is a surprisingly strange passage in Vygotsky’s text on the history of the development of higher mental functions as published in Volume 3 of the Soviet Collected Works. It asserts that “we know that in primitive people, there is a magical attitude toward words. Thus, in peoples developing under the influence of religion, for example, the Jews, there are words that must not be said, and if one must speak of something, let us say, of a dead person, then one must add the words, ‘May this not spread to your house.’” (Vygotsky, 1983, p. 163 in the Russian edition; Vygotsky, 1997, p. 119 in the translation) If the two sentences are read as forming one proposition, they may suggest that Jews in general, or some part of the Jewish population, belong among the primitive peoples. Since there are rumors that Vygotsky’s text was redacted posthumously, one wonders whether the wording had been modified for the Soviet edition, or whether Vygotsky himself, having become a secularized and politically engaged Soviet citizen after 1917, might have fiercely rejected his earlier beliefs and considered them as primitive and magical.

As mentioned above, Vygotsky was just one among innumerable Russian Jews who sought to define their Jewishness—or non-Jewishness. Therefore, he was no exception. Yet, the surprising fact, which demands an explanation, is that the post-1917 Vygotsky differs significantly, regarding his own cultural origins, from the pre-1917 Vygotsky. One ought, therefore, to ask what the reasons for or causes of this shift were.

**Vygotsky the systemic thinker and semiotician**

From 1930 on, Vygotsky became increasingly interested in the study of the systemic “nature” of mental life—“functions in system”—and did not want to limit psychological research to the reconstruction of the ontogeny of mental functions. It is important to highlight the role of developmental processes: indeed, when Vygotsky got interested in the systemic “nature” of the psyche, it was at first in the context of the dynamics of mental life. However, while emphasizing the relevance of the systemic approach, Vygotsky did not discard analyses of partial functions, linked to “anomalous development” (Chapter 11, pp. 155–175) due to diseases, deprivations of various kinds, or brain injuries. A researcher with such a broad array of interests could not limit himself to laboratory work but had to look for empirical material elsewhere, too. And Vygotsky did so: in addition to the psychological laboratory, the clinic became a research site of importance. Dozens of case
histories testify to Vygotsky’s clinical approach. The Notebooks offer at least some glimpses into this aspect of his work in progress. This is to say that Luria’s post-Vygotskian emphasis on neuropsychological research practices emerged also from the scientific activities of his older friend in later years. Hence, the questions arose of what happened when one or more mental functions of a child were disturbed while developing, and how the damage thus caused differed from functional disorders in adults suffering from brain injuries. Here is Vygotsky’s answer in a nutshell: “The defect and the underdevelopment of higher functions are related to one another in a different way than the defect and the underdevelopment of elementary functions.” (p. 156) Hundreds of contributions have been written on the seemingly most urgent topic of Vygotsky versus Piaget over the past decades. And while some of the differences between the two “giants” of developmental psychology may turn out to be less impressive than initially believed, the width of the theory of development with its focus on constructions, deconstructions, and reconstructions, and the decidedly systemic approach of the “late” Vygotsky certainly marks a nontrivial difference from the theories of the Geneva psychologist.

Persons think, not their cortices. Persons perceive, not their eyes, ears, noses, or any other of the human senses. And persons feel, not the amygdalas hidden beneath their skulls. Some versions of utterly trivialized, popular versions of neuroscience may suggest that it is the other way round. Vygotsky, however, conceived of the human person as the unit that permanently integrates the complex interfunctional mental operating. Interfunctional mental operations are based on physiological operations, but they must not be reduced to the latter. “The primitive and the civilized person have the same color perception—physiologically, but not psychologically.” (p. 179) Yet, it also turns out that Vygotsky was visibly interested in the concept of person only for a relatively short period: before 1930–31, the concept was not present in his writings and after that it disappeared. By the way, the French Marxist philosopher and psychologist Georges Politzer makes a short-lived appearance in the Notebooks (see p. 140 and n. 57, pp. 150–151). This figure also aimed at founding an encompassing “concrete psychology,” a project that bears some resemblance to Luria’s “romantic science.”

“What is a system. Psychologist reached false conclusions about the elementary functions, for they only function in systems.” (p. 178) These two sentences were recorded by Vygotsky during a meeting on some results of Luria’s expedition to Uzbekistan. (The traces of this meeting are in themselves of interest as an early document of the unofficial reception of Luria’s groundbreaking cultural-historical field studies.) According to Luria, conceptual thinking radiates on other mental functions. Its development thus impinges not only on thought processes as such but also perceptual and other mental functions. And this was what Vygotsky also viewed as one of the key consequences to be drawn from Luria’s findings.

Meaning and sense are crucial for mental life defined as working functional systems: both are likely to radically modify mental functions and their interplay. Vygotsky had thus begun to ascribe the utmost importance to meaning and sense for psychological research by the second half of 1932 at the latest. Many of the ideas expressed in the last chapter of Thinking and Speech were anticipated in the Notebooks (see p. 251). And it is there that we also find evidence that he seriously envisaged reorienting his work and that of his more or less close followers.
“Everything is in word meaning: That is the full-fledged, sound explanation: psychologica psychologice.” (p. 254; Vygotsky’s emphasis) what kind of relationship exists between thought and word? Vygotsky argued that words do not merely express thoughts, but that thoughts fulfill themselves in words (p. 260). When introducing the German translation of Vygotsky’s opus magnum, Luckmann (1969, p. xxi) quite purposefully recalled Heinrich von Kleist’s essay on the gradual production of thoughts while speaking, assuming a high degree of congeniality between that writer and the Russian psychologist. Hence, thoughts may find their way to different words and sentences, while different thoughts may hide behind same words and sentences—depending on context.

Vygotsky also set forth a (as we believe) thrilling and rather original idea in which the “phasic” side of the word—waves in the air—connects the speaker to the surrounding world, whereas the “semic” side of the word belongs to the semantic layout of his or her consciousness. This, Vygotsky claimed, should be at the heart of the mind-body problem, not the utterly un-Spinozist relation between the “whole” of the material and the “whole” of the spiritual worlds (pp. 251–253).

Looking critically back at his earlier research, Vygotsky came to value the method of “double stimulation;” however, he also argued for moving beyond it (pp. 253–254). This method had been applied, among other things, to the experiments on concept formation that he had administered together with Leonid S. Sakharov and also had been used by Leontiev in his studies on memory. Let us briefly illustrate the method of double stimulation and take the example of concept formation. One kind of stimuli consists of geometrical forms, while the other consists of signs such as made-up meaningless words. Another example is the study of memory. One kind of stimuli consists of items that are to be memorized, while the other kind of stimuli consists of signs such as knots. But now, Vygotsky criticized his former method of “double stimulation” for ignoring the meaning and sense of signs (see, for example, p. 300). And note that meaning and sense are not only relevant for speech and thought but also for the mind in action as such, for consciousness as well as for practical activities—without the slightest solipsistic closure of mind! Evidence for this methodological reorientation can be found in a short sentence on both “the semantic field” and the “sparring with Lewin” (Chapter 25, here: p. 405; Vygotsky’s emphasis): “Meanings are no psychische Gestalten but sozio-Gestalten: the relationship–consciousness: my relationship to my environment.” Instead of simply sticking to the “method of double stimulation,” Vygotsky now advocated a “semic method,” also known as semantic, semasiological, or significative method (chapter 18, pp. 291–309). Or, put differently, what answer is there to Vygotsky’s question as to what was the problem with “double stimulation”? “The impasse was to a considerable extent caused by the fact that: (a) On the one hand, we moved from showing that the higher psychological functions result from the elementary ones and proving their common origin and nature ... to the study of forms of movement within the higher psychological functions, (b) on the other hand, we remained intent on finding the similarity and not the difference.” (p. 300; Vygotsky’s emphasis) and second, what is to be done instead? “Now the task is to study the movement of the sign itself” (ibid.). And: “Meaning is the highest problem of the sign operation. Just like there is no higher behavior without the sign (without the function of the sign), there is no psychological system without meaning.” (p. 301)
The Notebooks’ impact on studying Vygotsky

One question we have raised regarding the Notebooks is to what extent this collection of archival documents might essentially modify current Vygotsky studies or, more generally, the image of Vygotsky as a creative, genial, revolutionary, or otherwise great psychologist and researcher? It may be that the greatness of scientists is in general not the best category to start with—or even to end with—in considering past and present archival monuments. The Notebooks are by all means monumental in terms of the volume of publications at stake. But is the outcome after reading the hundreds of pages of notes equally monumental?

Among the remarks that introduce the Notebooks, one comes across the assertion that “... many of the notes had a clear Aufforderungscharakter (valence or affordance ...) and, as it were, urged the editors to uncover their hidden meaning. The outcome surpassed our expectations: The family archive revealed the other side of the moon, the unknown Vygotsky.” (p. xi) We believe that this is a slight exaggeration—unless we mentally flatten the other side of the moon. Rather, the Notebooks look like a cake made entirely of cherries, of hot things, cool things, interesting things, dull things, odd things, remote things, and so on. That is to say, those who are feverishly studying Vygotsky’s life—and even more his work—may find things that have enough incentive power to further their thoughts and interpretations of this man. Those who have, due to their temperament or understanding of how to effectively do research in psychology today, ignored Vygotsky so far will continue to do so, despite the promise that there is another side of the moon of psychological research, as they will tomorrow or in ten years. And those who, like ourselves, prefer to take a not too close, and mostly neutral, attitude toward Vygotsky’s life and work will likely use the valuable index to look up whether a thread of further historical or theoretical research shows up within the body of these Notebooks.

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