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Philosophy, activity, life

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This paper, written to honor Prof. Vladislav Lektorsky on the occasion of his 90th birthday, addresses a subject to which Lektorsky has returned many times in the course of his long and distinguished career: the concept of activity. I begin with the distinction between activity and action, arguing against the view, associated with Leontiev, that actions are components of activities. In my view, the distinction between activity and action is an aspectual rather than ontological or mereological one. I then draw on the analysis of intentional action offered by G.E.M. Anscombe to argue that her understanding of action, intention and practical knowledge, when supplemented by insights from MacIntyre, McDowell and others, provides grounds to endorse three theses central to the activity approach (theses I find in Prof. Lektorsky's recent summation of the tradition): that (i) consciousness, the inner plane of our mental lives, can be understood only in relation to the forms of our activity as embodied beings; (ii) human agency and behavior cannot be described or explained without essential reference to the social, cultural and historical context; and (iii) selves or persons are constituted in and through their activity. I then consider the objection that my analysis is too focused on the intentional activities of the individual, at the expense of the collective. I reply that the unit of analysis is neither the individual nor the collective, but the human life form. There is plenty of room, as there must be, for countenancing joint, shared and collective intentionality, and for recognizing that individuals and collectives do many things unintentionally. But no sense can be made of any of that without a robust account of intentional action. I believe my findings are congenial to three themes that characterize the legacy of Vladislav Lektorsky: (i) respect for the phenomenology of everyday thought and experience; (ii) humanism; and (iii) the belief that much is to be gained by bringing Russian philosophy into constructive dialogue with fruitful trends in Anglo-American philosophy.

Keywords: action, activity, consciousness, culture, human being, life, mind, reason, self-consciousness

1. In his book "Open Minded", the philosopher Jonathan Lear reminds us that Freud described psychoanalysis as an "*impossible* profession". Lear asserts that the same is true of philosophy, and he continues:

> This is not a metaphor or a poetically paradoxical turn of phrase. It is literally true. And the impossibility is ultimately a matter of logic. For *the very idea* of a profession is that of a defensive structure, and it is part of *the very idea* of philosophy and psychoanalysis to be activities which undo such defenses. It is part of the logic of psychoanalysis and philosophy that they are forms of life committed to living openly – with truth, beauty, envy and hate, wonder, awe and dread [Lear, 1998, p. 5].

It seems to me that Vladislav Lektorsky has lived a philosophical life of the kind Lear describes – one devoted to authentic engagement with a range of metaphysical, epistemic and ethical issues about the nature of reality and humanity's place within it – and he has done this with honesty, integrity and wisdom. It is a privilege to contribute to this special issue in his honour. He is a philosopher in the true sense of the word.

Of course, even though Lear declares the profession of philosophy to be "a contradiction in terms", Prof. Lektorsky and I, like many of the contributors to and readers of this issue, have lived our philosophical lives in universities or research institutes. Empirically speaking, philosophy *is* a profession, and "professional philosophers" have to uphold the integrity of the philosophical life in the face of the obstacles to which Lear alludes. Many of us fail in this and are corrupted by in the institutional context. But not Lektorsky. He deserves special recognition for the enormous role he has played in preserving and cultivating the spirit of philosophy in Russia, in the Soviet period and thereafter, not least of all during his long tenure as editor of "Voprosy filosofii". He has somehow managed to live a philosophical life *and* make a valuable contribution to academic philosophy. Given the nature of the times through which he has lived, that is no small achievement.

2. My paper discusses a concept that is important to Prof. Lektorsky, as it is to me: *activity*. Our first philosophical meeting took place in March 1983, when, as a visiting research student at MGU, I gave a seminar at the Institute of General and Pedagogical Psychology. Lektorsky kindly attended the event at the invitation of my mentor Felix Mikhailov and, along with Vladimir Bibler, Vasilli Davydov and Mikhailov himself, gave a considered and extremely helpful response to my paper[1]. The topic was personal identity, but the "activity approach" was never far from view. Over the intervening years, Prof. Lektorsky and I have discussed the concept of activity, in conversation together and in many of our respective writings, so I thought it a fitting subject for this tribute.

In one of his most recent publications, Lektorsky presents a masterly summation of the activity approach, from its inception in the work of Rubinstein, and subsequent development in the writings of Ilyenkov, Batishchev, Shchedrovitsky and other philosophers, and in the psychological theories of Leontiev, Galperin and

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[1] A recording of the seminar was later transcribed, translated into English, and published in *Studies in East European Thought* [Bakhurst, 1995].

Davydov, among others [Lektorsky, 2021]. In addition, Lektorsky brings out connections and parallels to currents in Western thought, not just to "Cultural Historical Activity Theory" (CHAT), but to writings on social construction, embodied cognition, enactivism and extended mind. Lektorsky's account makes evident that the activity approach is a house of many mansions, connected by a variety of walkways, bridges and tunnels. Such is the diversity of perspectives – some complementary, some in tension with each other – that one may wonder whether it makes sense to speak of *the* activity approach at all. Nevertheless, one can identify certain common themes, however abstract, which permeate the many views Lektorsky canvasses, though their proponents interpret them variously and accord them different weight. They are that:

i) consciousness, the inner plane of our mental lives, can be understood only in relation to the forms of our activity as embodied beings.
ii) human agency and behaviour cannot be described or explained unless its social, cultural and historical context is in view.
iii) a self or person is constituted in and through its activity.

In what follows, I propose to reflect on the concept of activity, as I now understand it, to explore whether and in what sense these shared theses are true. In this, I will not focus on Lektorsky's own understanding of these issues, but I hope he will find the account I offer congenial to his way of thinking[2].

3. I want to begin by correcting a misconception concerning the relation of activity and action. It is easy to think that *activity* is the wider category, under which the concept *action* falls. This is suggested by Leontiev's portraying actions as (or among) the constituents of activities. Adopting this view, one might then draw a contrast between the activity approach and Anglo-American philosophy of action, the latter focusing almost exclusively on the specific deeds treated as discrete events. By emphasizing activity, it might be argued, we therefore pay heed to the wider context of action, because actions are merely parts of activities and must be understood and explained as such.

However, even though I despair of the "pointillism" of analytic philosophy of action, I do not think that the activity/action contrast is best drawn by treating actions as components of activity. The rationale for the compositional view is something like this. If we take an activity, such as *painting a house*, it is clear that engaging in that activity involves doing lots of particular things. Painting the house involves the buying the paint, brushes and other materials; cleaning and preparing the surfaces; applying a primer and then topcoats, and so on. However, if we say that these various actions make up the activity, we have to reckon with the fact that each of them involves activity of some kind. Doing may be composed of things that are done; but the things done are themselves doings. So, if action is the stuff of activity, activity is equally the stuff of action[3].

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[2] I discuss Lektorsky's philosophy directly in [Bakhurst, 2002]. This paper was written for a volume commemorating his 70th birthday and later reprinted in a volume celebrating his 80th [Bakhurst, 2012]. I thought I should offer something entirely different for his 90th! Some of the ideas I develop here are anticipated in [Bakhurst, 2018].

[3] Of course, Leontiev distinguishes activity and action on other grounds. For example, he holds that activities are governed by motives and actions by goals. But this is also a dubious distinction, for

The difference between activity and action is not one of ontological significance. It is rather a difference of *aspect*: whether our focus is the *doing* (activity) or the *thing done* (action, deed)[4]. It is no surprise that the Russian philosophical tradition, which emphasizes process, development, change and transformation, adopts activity rather than action as a favourite category, while the more atomistic metaphysics of modern Western philosophy is drawn to the concept of discrete actions. This reflects an important difference of philosophical temperament, but as a matter of philosophical substance, it is superficial.

4. If I am right about this, a suitably rich understanding of *action*s could bring into view precisely the same philosophical themes that the activity approach articulates. We can see this if we consider the work of Elizabeth Anscombe. At the opening of her famous paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" [Anscombe, 1958], Anscombe asserts that it is not fruitful to do moral philosophy as long as we lack "an adequate philosophy of psychology". By this she meant, not that ethics should interest itself in the findings of empirical psychologists, but that we need a philosophical analysis of human thought and action that explores the concepts with which we think and speak of thought and action and sets them against the background from which they derive their sense. Only then will we begin to find the resources on which a mature moral philosophy must draw. Anscombe herself made a start on this project in a contemporaneous publication, her slim masterpiece *Intention* [Anscombe, 2000].

In her book, Anscombe offers the following analysis. When agents act intentionally, the nature and form of their action is exhibited in the responses they make to a certain kind of Why?-question, one directed at disclosing the reasons in light of which they acted or are acting. For example, seeing someone on a railway platform inserting coins in a machine, we may ask: (A) Why are you putting money in that machine? To this, the person replies: I'm buying a train ticket. The Why?-question can now be iterated: (B) Why are you buying a train ticket? Answer: I'm going to Ottawa. And again: (C) Why are you going to Ottawa? Answer: To visit my friends. (D) Why are visiting your friends? Answer: We are going to celebrate the publication of their new book.

Eventually we are offered a reason that ceases to prompt a further "Why?-question" because it identifies something worthy of doing that does not require explanation. It maybe that this is because we reach an "ultimate end" – something "good

activity and action, at least where they are undertaken intentionally, are both explained by citing the agent's reasons and terms like "motive", "goal", "purpose", and "end" all serve to bring an agent's reasons into view. There is no philosophical rationale for associating motive with activity and goal with action, except perhaps to invoke an aspectual difference (*motive* being something that governs the *doing* while *goal* (*tsel*) being that in virtue of which the thing was *done*). Perhaps something like this was Leontiev's reason for making the distinction. However, in English and Russian, the term "motive" (*motiv*) in its forensic sense is used to identify a suspect's overarching reason for perpetrating the crime, which can take the form *either* of an end or goal (*tsel*) the suspect sought to realize (e.g. inheriting the estate), *or* of the suspect's disposition (e.g. jealousy, spite, vengeance), which explains why he took himself to have reason to act as he did. So Leontiev's concept of motive is a technical one, which, if I am right, is not particularly helpful.

[4] A Russian ordinary language philosopher – if such a thing were possible – might make this point by invoking the aspectual system of Russian verbs that describe our doings and deeds.

in itself" – acting for the sake of which is always intelligible. Or it may be that, in the context at hand, we arrive at something that we take to exhaust the agent's reasons, indicating something the agent thinks worth doing for its own sake, even if that might be questioned from some other perspective. In the present case, it is unlikely we will feel that the answer to (D) is incomplete. It succeeds in identifying the end the agent seeks to realize by doing the various things the agent's answers set out, things that are means to this end (whatever intrinsic merits they might have in themselves). The agent's final end might be to engage in an *activity* rather to complete an action, as in this case where the end lies the celebrating, not the having celebrated.

It is an important feature of Anscombe's analysis that intentional action is self-conscious in the following sense. If I am acting intentionally then I know what I am doing, under a description that expresses what I take to be my reason. I can't intentionally be buying a ticket unless I would assent to "buying a ticket" (or equivalent) as a description of my action. Of course, at the same time there may be many things I am doing unintentionally. For example, my dropping coins in the machine may be startling a child in the queue behind me, but startling the child is not what I am doing intentionally, and it would not therefore figure in my answer to the Why?-question. Indeed, much that I am doing unintentionally I may not know that I am doing at all. But what I am doing intentionally I will acknowledge as such under an appropriate description of the act.

Now Anscombe says that such "practical knowledge" is not acquired "by observation"; that is, I do not know what I am doing intentionally by observing myself doing it, in the way that I might discover what you are doing intentionally by watching you do it, or what I am doing unintentionally, by, say, seeing myself in a mirror (e.g. accidentally spilling my wine). Our practical knowledge of our intentional actions is not separate from our doings; here doing and knowing are one.

Anscombe's claim that one knows what one is doing "without observation" can seem perplexing. If my action is an event in the world, then do I not need recourse to observation to determine that I am actually doing what I intend to do? To adapt an example of Anscombe's [Anscombe, 2000, §§ 45–46], suppose that, to amuse my students, I blindfold myself and attempt to write the first paragraph of Hume's *Treatise* on the whiteboard. I may think I am writing Hume's words though in fact the marker I am using is empty of ink and nothing is being written. Surely, we must rely on observation to determine what we are actually doing.

I think the appropriate response to this objection is to maintain that *practical* knowledge is non-observational, but fallible. So, in the case under consideration, I do not in fact know what I am doing, a circumstance disclosed by the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, to be gleaned by observation, about what is actually appearing (or not appearing) on the whiteboard. In this context, the most I can know without observation is what I am intending to do. But where my intentions are realized, then my practical knowledge reaches out into my worldly deed, even if its source is self-consciousness, not observation.

5. Once we acknowledge the internal relation of intentional human activity and self-consciousness, it is a short step to seeing the truth in the first of the themes of the activity approach noted above: that consciousness can be understood only in relation

to activity. In our intentional actions, our consciousness and our bodily movement are a unity. Such activity is not an interaction between two distinct realms, one inner (consciousness) and one outer (bodily movement, behaviour). My intention in action does not stand behind my bodily movement, directing it at a distance. No, my intention literally in-forms my doing; my intelligence – reason – is present in the movements that constitute my doing what I do. My intention is embodied (or, one might equally say, the movements of my body are ensouled). Here is the prospect of a philosophy of psychology liberated from the distortions of *both* Cartesianism and reductive naturalism. The door is opened to a new naturalism, in which reason is seen as a power of the human animal instantiated in and expressed by its activity, a power it falls to the philosopher to illuminate in all its depth and complexity, in consort with the psychologist and other practitioners of the human sciences.

Of course, the arguments I have articulated so far with Anscombe's help are a priori, not empirical, in character, though they gain momentum, I think, from the knowledge we possess in virtue of *being* rational animals, from our self-conscious experience of rational life. In so far as these arguments are contributions to psychology, this is rational, not empirical, psychology. Leontiev, it seems to me, wanders between the two. As a result, sometimes he invites us to see his view of the creation of the inner plane through the internalization of object-oriented activity as an empirical thesis, which one might amplify by scientific investigation and verify by empirical means, though no comprehensive empirical theory of internalization has been forthcoming. In contrast, one might read Leontiev's view as a philosophical thesis and evaluate as such, whether critically or sympathetically.

Few devotees of activity theory now see much potential in the idea of internalization. This is because Leontiev seems to work with a sharp contrast between inner and outer realms and then suggests that events in the latter are somehow transplanted into the former, or rather that events in the latter somehow turn inwards and thereby bring into being the inner plane itself. What was mere bodily movement is internalized to create an ideal stage. Such processes, conceived as real events in human development, are deeply mysterious, and it is no wonder that their veracity is contested. The problem, however, is that it is tempting to recoil from this vision of internalization by affirming the integrity of consciousness as a kind of innate principle, existing prior to and independent of any process of formation, and this is also an unsatisfying position.

I think, however, that further attention to the logic of intentional action helps us extricate ourselves from this dilemma. I have argued that intentional action is self-conscious action. By self-consciousness is meant not, or not merely, the self's awareness of its experiences as its own (this is no simple "I = I", as Rubinstein understood [see Lektorsky, 2021, p. 407–408]); here the person is self-conscious because they have non-observational knowledge of their agency, which is at once knowledge of their bodily presence in the world. Now such knowledge requires concepts. If I am intentionally to buy my train ticket to go to Ottawa to celebrate with my friend, I must have the self-knowledge that this is what I am doing, and that requires a wealth of concepts and attendant beliefs about the world. Now no creature is born with such concepts and beliefs. They must be acquired. The usual route to their acquisition is initiation into language, into styles of thinking and

reasoning, and into the modes, patterns and practices (activities) of communal life. And so intentional activity, in a form truly expressive of the life of a rational animal, presupposes a lengthy (indeed essentially incompletable) process of formation, or *Bildung*, to use the familiar German expression.

With this in view, we can now we see the truth in the second theme of the activity approach: the essentially socio-historical character of human activity. Once again, its vindication lies in the insights of rational, rather than empirical, psychology, though these provide a framework in which empirical enquiry may fruitfully proceed. I will not dwell here on the idea of *Bildung*, which is the topic of my book *The Formation of Reason* [Bakhurst 2011; Bakhurst, 2014], and on my writings inspired by Ilyenkov's remarkable reflections on the dialectics of the ideal [see, e.g., Ilyenkov, 2009; Levant, Oitennen, eds, 2014; Bakhurst 1991; Bakhurst, 1997; Bakhurst, 2021]. I will limit myself to one comment. I think there is a perfectly good sense in which *Bildung* can be seen as a process of "internalization". This is because *Bildung* is a process in which the child is initiated into practices which she "makes her own". Learning a word, acquiring a concept, entering a social practice, begins with engaging in a public activity, often joint activity with others, which the child gradually masters. Mastery here means the acquisition of the self-conscious awareness of her activity that enables her to use the word, deploy the concept, or participate in the practice intentionally. Here, it seems to me, lies the truth in the idea of formation as internalization, understood in a way that does not depend on the reification of the inner-outer distinction.

Seeing this, we can maintain, with Leontiev, Ilyenkov and Vygotsky, that in this process the inner plane "comes into being", in the sense that only through this process do human beings come to have an inner life, with depth and significance they can ponder and explore, and which they can contrast to "external reality". This is not to deny that babies and infants, or non-human animals, possess forms of self-knowledge that make intentional action possible. An infant reaching for a toy knows what she is doing under some aspect even if she cannot articulate this in language. She has relevant pre- or proto-linguistic concepts that make this knowledge possible. Ilyenkov, of course, is alive to this, arguing that we should not think of these conceptual capacities as simply a gift of nature, an inheritance of evolution, but attend to how they are formed and cultivated in joint activity before the child can master them and make them her own. This he takes to be demonstrated and illuminated by Meshcheryakov's work with blind-deaf children [Ilyenkov, 1975; Bakhurst, Padden, 1991]. This leads Ilyenkov to emphasize the child's appropriation of object-oriented activities rather than language acquisition, and to privilege the former over the latter [Ilyenkov, 1974]. In this, I think Ilyenkov underestimates the formative significance of language, because of an understandable, if unfortunate, prejudice against forms of philosophy that are preoccupied with the linguistic (Anglo-American analytic philosophy, on the one hand, and hermeneutics, on the other). But we do not have to follow Ilyenkov in this. Indeed, the more we see language itself as a form of embodied activity (heeding here the counsel of the later Wittgenstein), then the continuity between initiation into forms of joint activity and initiation into language comes into view. But even then, we can still maintain, as I think we must, that only when the child acquires the massive conceptual resources

enabled by natural language can she be said to possess a rich and unified conception of the world and, with that, an inner life that can exhibit analogous richness and unity.

6. The socio-historical context is relevant, of course, not just to the explanation of the formation of human powers of thinking and acting. It is relevant to the explanation of any exercise of those powers. Consider the following case, adapted from one discussed by Alasdair MacIntyre [MacIntyre, 1997]. A man is gardening at his home. He mows the lawn, trims the hedges, prunes the roses, puts fertilizer on the rose beds, and waters his vegetable patch. All this he does intentionally, and his doings, singularly and collectively, are explained by citing the reasons in light of which he does what he does. Now it is important that the intelligibility of those reasons rests on knowledge of the wider context. We have to appreciate how what he is doing is good for the garden, both in the sense of helping the plants flourish and in the sense of enhancing its aesthetic properties, and this requires some understanding of gardening techniques and of the prevailing aesthetic standards. And even this is not as straightforward as it might appear. Gardening – like chess, jazz, architecture, art, teaching, physics, philosophy, and many other human activities – is a "practice" in MacIntyre's distinctive sense of the term; that is a

> coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends or goods involved, are systematically extended [Ibid., p. 187].

It is important that the goods internal to the practice are not fully intelligible "from outside", and so explanations of the behaviour of those who participate in it demand sympathetic identification with the participant perspective. You cannot fully appreciate the goods of gardening unless you have some familiarity with how the practice looks to those who engage in it. Of course, there may be further reasons why the man is gardening, reasons that are indifferent to, complement, or even undermine those furnished by the practice's internal goods. Perhaps he is (also) gardening for the good of his health, to release stress, to impress his neighbours, or because he promised his spouse. Understanding these reasons requires further appreciation of context, of norms of fitness and mental health, of interpersonal and institutional roles and relations, community behaviour, promising and perhaps much else. In short, understanding what the man is doing involves seeing his actions as parts of the fabric of a human life, a life that is a particular socio-cultural-historical reality. The depth and complexity found even in a mundane case such as this is something it is easy to miss because we are so used to taking it for granted.

MacIntyre makes much of the fact that the background to action explanation often takes a *narrative* form. A person's actions are woven into a story that provides, explicitly or implicitly, the necessary context that renders them intelligible. So if we ask the man in his garden what he is up to, his response might take the following form:

> Well, I like to get out here at weekends because this garden takes a fair amount of work, since we planted these roses – which have not done as well as we hoped, so I have to feed them from time to time and remove all this dead stuff – and put in that vegetable patch. Toby – that's my spouse – thought we should grow our own because the vegetables in the supermarket are often tasteless and God knows what pesticides are on them. The garden's coming along. I like to keep the lawn short, and the hedges trimmed. Perhaps I'm too fussy, but I know that's what most people in this neighbourhood expect and I'm determined to do a better job than those people next door with their messy bushes. And, of course, Toby insists I get some exercise after the health scare I had a couple of years ago and it's so important to get my mind off everything happening at work…

Such is the real life of action explanation (in contrast to the rather hygienic abstractions usually discussed in philosophy articles). Here I have focused exclusively on the man's intentional actions. The picture becomes yet more complex when we introduce the various things he is doing unintentionally, as well as motives, which though he might not be (fully) aware of them, help explain his actions, intentional and unintentional, even though they may be in tension with the story *he* wants to tell.

MacIntyre concludes that we are story-telling animals who make sense of our deeds, and of the deeds of others, through the medium of narrative. Iris Murdoch beautifully captures this idea she writes that:

> Literary modes are very natural to us, very close to ordinary life and to the way we live as reflective beings. <…> When we return home and "tell our day", we are artfully shaping material into story form. (These stories are very often funny, incidentally.) So in a way as word-users we all exist in a literary atmosphere, we live and breathe literature, we are all literary artists, we are constantly employing language to make interesting forms out of experience which perhaps originally seemed dull or incoherent. How far reshaping involves offences against truth is a problem any artist must face [Murdoch, 1997, p. 6–7].

Such story telling may be limited to representing various actions as events that hang together in a meaningful way as contributions to the realization of some intelligible end. Think of detectives trying to determine what was done in the perpetration of a crime and for what motive. But, as Murdoch's reflections bring out, the stories we tell make sense of actions by placing them in the broader context of the life of the agent, and so the act of storytelling lends form, not just to the actions, but to agents themselves. This MacIntyre calls "the narrative constitution of the self": our selves are the subjects of the life stories against which our actions make sense, and so telling those stories fashions our identity as our narratives' protagonist. Of course,we are not the sole authors of our life-stories: the stories we tell about our deeds coexist with the stories others tell about them. Any life story is interwoven with the stories of many other lives.

The "elusiveness" of the self has been a philosophical preoccupation since John Locke introduced the term into the parlance of British empiricism and a few decades later Hume argued that the idea lacked empirical content and could only be a fiction. The idea that the self is a narrative construction can certainly seem attractive to philosophers and psychologists who are drawn to empiricism, pragmatism

or other philosophical positions that favour ontological parsimony, and in the 1980s and '90s the idea gained traction in a variety of forms, in the writing of Jerome Bruner [Bruner, 1990; Bruner, 2002] and Daniel Dennett [Dennett, 1991], among others. I agree that it is vital to recognize the importance of narrative to our practices of action explanation and our modes of self-understanding. We are self-conscious beings who live in light of a conception of ourselves, of our relation to others and to the world, and of the meaning and value that we find there. The terms in which we frame that conception can radically influence the ways of being we find possible for us, or even intelligible. So much we learn from Bruner and Oliver Sacks [e.g., Sacks, 1973; Sacks, 1985], both of whom were much inspired by Alexander Luria, a figure whose brilliant case histories, and vision of romantic science, ought to have a more prominent place in the pantheon of the activity approach [Luria, 1979; Luria, 1987a; Luria, 1987b]. However, our selves do not have the *soi disant* reality that Bruner imagines they do. We cannot make ourselves up through acts of narration, for who are the narrators if not beings that exist prior to and independently of their storytelling, and whose lives their stories attempt to be true to? What we call "selves" are actually persons, and persons are animals. Ours is the being of rational animals who, as I have stressed, live lives structured by self-consciousness. Our rationality may enhance – even transform – our animality, but it does not cancel it. The life of a rational animal is one in which animality and rationality are united. The third thesis of the activity approach – that selves are constituted in and through their activity – is true, but not because we narrate our selves into being. It is because a person is the subject of a life – the life of an embodied being – and what is a life but its living?

7. I want to conclude by considering an objection to the position I have been outlining, one that I imagine might be made by many in the activity tradition, Russian or Western. I like to think that Prof. Lektorsky will agree with my reply. The complaint is my position is too individualistic. I am focused on individual persons, on their actions, their selfhood, their lives. Admittedly, I invoke the cultural-historical context in describing how those individuals are formed, and as the background against which their lives are intelligible, but my unit of analysis remains the individual, rather than the collective, and that is out of keeping with the socio-historical orientation proper to the activity approach.

I think this complaint rests on a mistake. My subject is not the individual or the collective, but the human life-form. I have been describing the *kind* of thing the human being is, not particular human beings, except in so far as their doings exemplify the kind. It is not for nothing that Ilyenkov speaks constantly of *life-activity* (*zhiznedeyatel'nost'*). This is not a mere semantical variation on "activity", deployed for stylistic reasons. It points to the fact that the object of analysis is the human form.

Of course, the life-form is expressed in its individual members and intentional action is undertaken by individuals. That there can be intentional actions by corporate or collective persons is parasitic upon the intentional agency of human individuals. There can of course be joint, shared and collective intentionality, which, if Michael Tomasello is correct, is a – perhaps *the* – critical factor in human evolution, and so our capacity for joint, shared and collective intentionality will figure

in any adequate description of out lifeform [see, e.g., Tomasello, 2018; Tomasello, 2022]. But it remains the case that collective intentionality is possible only if individuals are intentional agents.

Of course, as I have stressed, there is much that we do unintentionally. I may intentionally teach views that I think are egalitarian and progressive but actually in so doing contribute to structures and ideologies that are oppressive, repressive and inegalitarian. I might think I am running my business effectively, efficiently and transparently, where in fact the systems I employ are snagged by unnecessary bureaucracy that confounds my employees and my clients. I may think my tactical system liberates the talents of my football team, while in actuality it stifles the players. The many political, economic and sociological schools of thought that grew out of Marxism, or formed in reaction to it, have sought to explore such things, and some versions of activity theory are among them. But we still need a theory of intentional action if we are to make sense of the things we do unintentionally, if only because what we do unintentionally is usually the outcome of doing something else intentionally.

As soon as one denies this and embraces a deterministic view that divides through by the intentional, we falsify our subject matter. For it is a feature of our life-form that our rational powers endow us with freedom in at least this respect: no description of the human life-form, of our nature, our history, our practices – i.e. no description of human activity – decides for us how we should or must act. We are beings for whom the Socratic question – How should we live? – is always apt and we are beings who can change ourselves as we change the answers that we give to it [see Bakhurst, 2021]. Marx understood this. That is why he said, in describing our species being, that human beings were not identical with themselves in the way that non-human animals are. For the non-human animal, a natural-historic description of its form of life describes the norms that structure and determine the mode of its existence. But this is not true of the human being (or not as true). What *is* true, as Marx saw, is that there are innumerable forces, historical, social, economic, psychological, evolving in complex ways "behind our backs", that influence how and why we act as we do and how we understand our actions. In the background to this insight is the mundane truth that human beings are fallible in their self-understanding and sometimes, perhaps often, misunderstand their reasons for action and deceive themselves about their intentions. So sometimes we have to look at ourselves "sideways-on" and evaluate our behaviour as we would the behaviour of another, by making our actions an object of observation rather than self-conscious apprehension [see Moran, 2001]. Of course, Marx saw that the solution to the oppressive and unjust structures that issue from our actions requires more than merely a transformation in understanding. It demands a change in economic relations that can only be precipitated by forces that cannot be controlled by individual agents. It requires collective action which can only begin to seem possible through the agency of further superindividual forces. But this is still an account of human action, intentional and otherwise, since all these forces work through the intentional doings of agents, however they understand them, and its rationale is to bring about changes that will enable human beings to express their freedom in fulfilling lives as intentional agents. That is surely the humanistic core of Marxism, and it is those forms of the activity approach that do not celebrate it, not mine, that combine the vice of falsehood with infidelity to the tradition that gave the approach its life.

8. If rational life is life informed by self-consciousness, then there is a sense in which philosophy is its highest expression, and that is what lends the philosophical life its nobility. Iris Murdoch amusingly writes that there is a "two-way movement in philosophy, a movement towards the building of elaborate theories, and a move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts. McTaggart says that time is unreal, Moore replies that he has just had his breakfast" [Murdoch, 1998, p. 299]. In fact, the situation is more complex, as Murdoch herself recognizes, as some approaches that appear to build elaborate theories are really attempts to elucidate forms of lived experience (e.g. Hegel's "Phenomenology") while others supposedly devoted to the everyday conceal elaborate metaphysical prejudices (e.g. ordinary language philosophy). But nevertheless, the oscillation Murdoch observes is real. In this paper, I have sought to move the activity approach back in the direction of the ordinary and mundane as a counter the excesses of its more systematic and theoretical expressions. I would expect Prof. Lektorsky to approve of this approach, for throughout his work, although he has always been comfortable exploring philosophy and science in its high-theoretical manifestations, it is his manner to show enormous respect for our familiar forms of thought and experience, for the everyday, mundane, ordinary concepts and conceptions which inform our lives and give us our intellectual bearings. This sensibility is central to Lektorsky's humanism and his to unerring ability to discern and deflate the philosophical pretensions of revisionist metaphysics, whether it be the pretensions of cybernetics (Ilyenkov's bugbear) or of contemporary transhumanism [see Lektorsky, 2012]. Moreover, Prof. Lektorsky understands that it is one thing to keeping the ordinary in view, another thing to know *how* properly to describe our familiar forms of thought and experience in a way that apprehends, refreshes, renews, and even transforms them, through sympathetic elucidation, reflection and critique [see Murdoch, 1998, p. 132]. In this, Lektorsky has always shown a sure eye and a steady hand. He is a model of philosophical moderation and sound good sense, and that is why he has lived the philosophical life as it should be lived. Long may this continue.

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Философия, деятельность, жизнь

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Эта статья, написанная в честь профессора Владислава Лекторского по случаю его 90-летнего дня рождения, посвящена предмету, к которому Лекторский неоднократно возвращался в течение своей долгой и знаменательной карьеры – это идея деятельности. Я начинаю с различения между деятельностью и действием, споря с точкой зрения, ассоциируемой с Леонтьевым, согласно которой действия – это части деятельности. По моему мнению, различение деятельности и действия скорее аспектное, нежели онтологическое или мереологическое. Затем я обращаюсь к анализу интенционального действия, предложенному Элизабет Энском, с целью доказать, что ее понимание действия, интенции и практического знания в сочетании с идеями Макинтайра, Мак-Дауэлла и других, предоставляет основания для подкрепления трех центральных подходов к пониманию деятельности (описание которых я нашел у профессора Лекторского в недавнем обзоре по этому вопросу): (i) сознание, внутреннее пространство наших ментальных жизней, может быть понято только в отношении к формам нашей деятельности как телесных существ; (ii) человеческая агентность и поведение не могут быть описаны или объяснены без отсылки к социальному, культурному и историческому контексту; (iii) самости или индивиды конструируются в их деятельности и ее посредством. Я учитываю возражение, что мой анализ слишком сфокусирован на интенциональной и индивидуальной деятельности в ущерб коллективной. На это я отвечаю, что основа анализа состоит не в индивидуальном и не в коллективном, единицей анализа является человеческая форма жизни. Здесь остается большой простор для поддержания общей, распределенной и коллективной интенциональности, и для признания того, что индивиды и коллективы делают множество вещей неинтенционально. Но в этом не было бы никакого смысла, если бы не здоровый учет интенционального действия. Я убежден, что мои идеи схожи с тремя темами, характеризующими наследие Владислава Лекторского: (i) уважение к феноменологии повседневной мысли и опыта; (ii) гуманизм; (iii) вера в продуктивность диалога между русской и англо-американской философией.

Ключевые слова: действие, деятельность, сознание, культура, человек, жизнь, разум, причина, самосознание

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