Dear Annalisa, dear Yrjö, ladies and gentlemen, friends of activity theory!

I really enjoy being here once more and thank you so much for your invitation.

To talk to this audience about Aleksej Nikolaev Leontiev and his work is in a certain sense easy because everybody knows his writings well, and it is for the very same reason really difficult because everybody is expecting something new. That’s ok, I myself come here looking forward to hearing something new, at least from Annalisa and Yrjö. So let me think about what could be new.

As for normal information on Leontiev’s “life and creative path” there is no need to repeat in details what his son, his grandson and Elena Sokolova recently published and what has been translated already into English, and what you easily can read with much more details than I could mention within a short lecture.

As for information beyond biographical and personal data, however, that is concerning the concrete political conditions of the so called cultural historical school in those decisive 30th and the then emerging activity theory our historical knowledge is unchanged and still very poor.

On the other hand, Dmitrij Leontiev’s recent publication of Leontiev’s most interesting Lectures on General Psychology or of his promising Methodological Scribbling pads (or diary) have up to now still not been translated from Russian. Both writings are fundamental for understanding the development of Leontiev’s concept of activity and his emerging activity theory. So I would say there is as well no progress or shift in our knowledge concerning the development of Leontiev’s activity theory.

I myself am actually working on two translation projects:
1. on a re-translation of “Activity. Consciousness. Personality” which is sold out long since, and whose last Russian edition had never been translated;
2. a new enlarged edition of Leontiev’s Early Writings which now includes that “Methodo-
logical diary” I mentioned before. But unfortunately I am not yet as fast with editing as in ear-
lier times. So both books will – hopefully – come out in spring next year. Therefore at present
I feel sorry for being unable to report really new discoveries or results concerning Leontiev’s
work.

So, what can I tell you? Or better: what would I like to discuss with you – when there is noth-
ing remarkable to report? I would really like to share with you some problems we are dealing
with in a circle of activity oriented colleagues in Berlin called “our saloon” who meet four
times a year and call themselves “the salooniki”. Our current matter of discussion is methodo-
logy, and our hardest struggle is about three methodological issues in Leontiev’s work:
1. Is it correct to name Leontiev’s psychological work “activity theory”? Or is activity theory
besides of psychology a theory of its own? Is Erik Grigorevič Judin right insisting in a differ-
ence and calling activity theory a general science or a methodology in contrast to the single
scientific discipline psychology?

2. How may we understand Leontiev’s word: “the realized activity is always more rich and
more true than consciousness anticipating it”? What kind of theory may we imagine that
could let life be richer than consciousness anticipating it?

3. Is it correct to argue that Leontiev’s activity theory and present activity theoretical dis-
course respectively are lacking a theoretical and methodological basis to even notice the revo-
lutionary change emerging from New Media and global digitalization processes (as I argued
in former publications)? Or may we find good reasons to argue that the concept of medium –
as well as other categories – belong to the genuine and fundamental methodological properties
Leontiev and activity theory are practically and implicitly working with?

I think it could possibly be interesting to know our arguments and hypotheses especially
within the context of intervention strategies. In the following I’ll therefore report some argu-
ments of our discussions with concern to these questions.
I.

Is Leontiev’s work correctly named activity theory? Or is it a psychology? Why do most scholars make a distinction and call Vygotsky’s work “cultural historical psychology” and Leontiev’s psychology “activity theory”?

After repeatedly studying Leontiev’s early manuscripts as well as his book “Activity. Consciousness. Personality” in particular, and after once more reading Judin’s book on “Systems approach and Principle of Activity” (2009) I rather soon came to the following conclusion: It is true, Leontiev distinguishes clearly between psychology on the one hand and philosophy of psychology on the other hand. But he is by no means comparatively clear concerning the difference between psychology and activity theory, thus giving rise to some chaos in the international reception of his work.

Judin is much more exact in this issue. He distinguishes not only between psychology and philosophy but also between philosophy and methodology, and has very clear ideas concerning their special functions and different relations to psychology. He also distinguishes between functions and structures of methodology. As for the latter we will consider later.

As for the concrete scientific methodology – I omit Judin’s other levels of methodology here – it comprises the whole totality of methods, principles, procedures and even techniques of research applied in this or that scientific discipline, while philosophy on the other hand has as its special object all types of orientation of every other scientific discipline and is therefore interestingly called by Judin the “self confidence of culture” and even more: “the self confidence of the epoch as a whole” (p. 141). But back to our methodological issue.

As you know, Judin’s leading methodological functions are characterised by two concepts: „explanatory principle“ and „object of investigation“. Psychology in general works with “activity” as its explanatory principle showing that not only every psychic function in ontogenesis but also the development of the psyche in phylogenesis as a whole can only be understood with the help of activity as a methodological means. To Judin therefore activity theory functions as special methodology of Leontiev’s psychology.

Further more, Judin argues, Leontiev himself brings about this methodological and conceptual chaos, I mentioned above, using the concept of activity at the same time as explanatory principle and as a means of defining the object of investigation. You remember the famous double structure of “activity-action-operation” and “motiv-goal-condition”. For these elements of the

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activity structure activity functions as the object of investigation of psychology and not as its explanatory principle. Of course Leont’ev must have used some kind of explanatory principle because things do not reveal their inner structure by themselves. But Leont’ev unfortunately did not mention it. This, however, is problematic because when using activity as object of investigation a new explanatory principle is absolutely necessary. Judin is therefore right commenting that Leontiev is here in danger of changing methodology into a theory. Thus it means an understandable – and in a certain sense even correct – reflection to call Leontiev’s work „activity psychology“, although it causes a special confusion about what is really meant. (And it does not make things easier when Leontiev often uses the terms “life” (žizn’), “communication” (kommunikacija) and “societal intercourse” (obščenie) as concretization of “activity”.)

To Judin however this confusion means no disadvantage because it apparently worked very productive within psychological research (see p. 104), although Judin on the other hand give warnings to Leontiev followers against an unchanged continuation of this practice (see. 321fff.), because what was functional and effective in Leontiev’s times could be a methodological simplification with unlucky results. I quote Judin:

Some psychologists tend towards explaining psychological phenomena by direct reference to socioeconomic appearances, considering e.g. goals of activity as products of labour division or equating activity with production what is obviously a nonpsychological category. This happens of course in a certain sense inevitably because the category of activity is up to now [1978!] not yet sufficiently clear. … But if researchers thus do not take into account the difference between activity as explanatory principle and activity as object of investigation – and this happens very often – then the effectiveness of the explanatory principle will be considered to be the measure of efficiency of the object of investigation, although this perhaps has not even been constructed. This construction however is a very specific methodological work … As long as the activity concept “works” as explanatory principle in psychology it is sufficient to present it in that three link structure of activity-action-operation. But if activity becomes an object of investigation this structure at least calls for a special argumentation and justification concerning its adequacy, appropriateness and completeness, and may not be accepted just in good faith.”(2009, p. 333-334)

So what could be the result of our reasoning as for our first issue?

1. Leontiev’s work is just as much a psychology as Vygotsky’s work. Both need – like any scientific discipline – a philosophy and a methodology as its foundation.
2. The difference between Vygotsky and Leontiev is much more dealing with the elaboration of the philosophical and methodological problems of activity.
3. As a consequence of the special sociohistorical and scientific cultural conditions in the former SU Leontiev sometimes tends towards a special form of ontologicalisation of his methodology.

4. Following Judin, this comes from the fact that scientific activity got mass character which demanded for elaborated research techniques and a standardisation of research activity. “As a result, the form of orientation – what is the methodological content of a scientific approach – changes to a form of regimentation, and its innovative potential changes into organisational power.” (Judin 2009, 103)

5. On the one hand this is a change in favour of methods and techniques of investigation. But on the other hand this change is very often neither in favour of the scientific construction of the object of investigation nor in favour of the structure of methodology, as we will see later.

6. But what is even worse: this change of activity philosophy or activity methodology into a form of regimentation is very much in danger of understanding theory as anticipation of practice and thus of practice as ratification of theory. We know this misuse from any nationalised form of marxism.

This understanding brought us immediately to our second question.

II.

Our second question: How may we understand Leontiev’s word: “the realized activity is always more rich and more true than consciousness anticipating it”? What kind of theory may we imagine that could let life be richer than consciousness anticipating it? How could it be possible to avoid the misuse of theory as anticipation of practice?

The one who posed this question first in our “saloon” was Volker Schürmann on whose contributions I’ll be referring in the following.²

I should first repeat in short the underlying problem of this question. The problem is, how the conceptualisation of practice is done in activity theory. Most commonly practice is considered to be the realisation of a given world view. A well know example is marxism with his motto: Truth is to be practically realised! – referring on Marx’ 11. thesis on Feuerbach arguing that philosophers had interpreted the world differently but now it’s the point to change it. To this wider understanding of practice practical actions are considered by their practical relevance or

societal importance only. In contrast to this wider understanding Schürmann speaks for a more narrow concept of practice characterized as irreducible to theory. Understanding the logic of theory as identical with or as the origin of practice he considers a “scholastic error” and insists on truth being a result of practice and thus being not real before its realisation. Practice is not the ratification of theory or in Leontiev’s words: “the realized activity is always more rich and more true than consciousness anticipating it” (Leontiev 1982, 125).

But what kind of theory may we imagine that could let life be richer than consciousness anticipating it?

We had some furious discussion in our saloon about this issue and we are still discussing our different positions – although my position was clear rather soon.

To me personally it was easy to agree with and to accept the argument: Neither practice “proves” any theory or philosophy nor theory defines strictly one and only one type of practice. Leontiev’s definition of the relation between personal sense and societal meaning as a never ending and permanent self reproducing dramatic conflict (Leontiev 1982, 150) is the key concept of this sentence. Schürmann even calls it “the decisive practical-political kernel of activity theory” (ibid.).

This is true if – and because – activity theory is a non-deterministic theory what does not mean indetermination but self movement (Leontiev 1982, 166, 173f).

The first point therefore is to radically refuse any theoretical approach understanding self movement in terms of effects of working conditions. Or as Schürmann puts it: Not self movement is to be explained because self movement just happens. What has to be explained is stiffness, inflexibility, inertia, stability, motionlessness, immobility (ibid.).

The second point is to radically refuse any theoretical approach understanding self movement in terms of a contradiction between moving and subject. Self movement is subjective in itself. Or to quote Schürmann: “Subjects are no entertainers of moving.” [I am quite aware of the difference between Leontiev and Luhmann concerning the notion of subject or subjective; but I think autopoiesis could function as a very productive interface between Leontiev and Luhmann.]

So far so well. But what kind of theory should we accept after refusing the wrong ones? [I neglect the difference between philosophy and theory here.]

Schürmann’s thesis: Activity theory is the only existing approach to show that life is richer than consciousness anticipating it because it is conceptualised as a process ontology.
To understand this we should first make clear what means “ontology” and “process”. In the following I refer mostly on Schürmann.³

Since Kant we know that every single scientific discipline requires to take certain basis assumptions for granted which by no means can be founded by this discipline itself but work as its explanatory foundation. Ontologies let us know about what kind of basic element or explanatory principle is assumed with a certain theory, that is they inform us about which kind of entities the world is made up in the point of view of a given theory. Roughly we may distinguish three types of ontologies: ontology of things, ontology of structures (that is of relations between things) and ontology of processes. In this sense “things”, “structures” and “processes” are basic elements that function as explanatory principles which are not to be founded themselves. They are orientation concepts and therefore they establish not different theories of the world itself but of conceptualisations of the world, and for this reason they are called ontologies reminding us that every ontology remains an ontology (Schürmann, ibid.).

After all it could be clear that a process ontology refers on processes as explanatory principle assuming that the world consists of nothing but processes. What were things in other ontologies are now products and products are nothing but congealed or stopped processes. What were structures in other ontologies are now relations of processes or of dormant processes that is of products. You remember the famous sentence of Marx: The worker has spun and his product is a spun yarn. While the other ontologies are in need of an additional principle to explain the movement of things or structures this is superfluous in a process ontology which considers the self movement as just happening. In doing so it puts the causes of moving within the moving itself. This is in fact of far reaching consequences: All the conditions, goals and means are now considered to be inner moments of activity itself (see Leontjew 1982, 75-83, esp.ecially 82 f.). Or in Leontiev’s words: “There is no development which could be directly derived from what in fact are nothing but its necessary prerequisites …The dialectic method requires … to study development as a process of self movement, that means, to analyse its inner moving relations, contradictions and mutual transitions and to investigate its prerequisites like its own genuine self transforming moments.” (ibid., 165) In this understanding “activity is no reaction or totality of reactions, but a special system with its own structure, its own inner transitions and transformations, and with its own development as well”. (ibid., 82)

³ For more literature see Schürmanns references.
system of activities following each other. Its within activity that takes place also the transition of the object into its subjective form, its image, and at the same time the transition of activity into its objective results, its products. Taken activity from this side, it functions as process to realise the mutual transitions between the poles of subject and object.” (ibid., 83)

Or in Marx’ words: The worker has spun and his product is a spun yarn. (Marx, MEW 23, 195)

If we now ask what could be the result of our reasoning concerning our second issue we may conclude:

1. To Leontiev activity is in fact a process ontology and more precisely
2. Activity theory is a philosophy and a methodology which let life always be richer than theory ever can be - or in Leontiev’s own words:
3. “It is practical activity, practice, what creates the manual or guide of theory to make it able to keep going in the direction which leads to adequate knowledge.” (ibid., 46)

The only point which possibly remains irritating comes from Leontiev’s often repeated emphasis that activity is the decisive counterargument against the “postulate of immediacy” (ibid. 78f)²

Leontiev explains his approach by reporting his experiments in Char’kov yielding, that appropriation of meaning did not result from communication, but came „originally from the child’s external activity with material objects and in cooperative interaction.“ (1982, 138) Therefore, with Leontiev, the formula “subject – sign – object” had to be replaced by the formula “subject – activity – object”.⁶

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Diese These muß man sogleich bei ihrer Formulierung präzisieren: Es geht hierbei um Tätigkeit und nicht um Verhalten oder solche nervalen physiologischen Prozesse, die die Tätigkeit realisieren. Die durch die Analyse herausgegliederten „Einheiten“ und die Sprache, mit deren Hilfe Verhaltensprozesse, zerebrale oder logische Prozesse einerseits und die gegenständliche Tätigkeit andererseits, beschrieben werden, fallen nicht zusammen.

So entstand in der Psychologie die Alternative, entweder am zweigliedrigen Grundschema Einwirkung des Objekts —> Veränderung der fließenden Zustände des Subjekts (oder, was prinzipiell das gleiche ist, am Schema S —> R) festzuhalten oder von einem dreigliedrigen Schema auszugehen, das als Mittelglied („als Zentralbegriff“) die Tätigkeit des Subjekts und entsprechend deren Bedingungen, Ziele und Mittel umfaßt, ein Glied, das die Zusammenhänge zwischen ihnen vermittelt. Unter dem Aspekt der Determination des Psychischen kann diese Alternative folgendermaßen formuliert werden: Entweder vertreten wir den Standpunkt, das Bewußtsein wird unmittelbar durch die Dinge und Erscheinungen der Umwelt bestimmt, oder wir gehen davon aus, daß das Bewußtsein durch das gesellschaftliche Sein der Menschen bestimmt wird, das nach Marx nichts anderes ist als ihr wirklicher Lebensprozeß. ⁵⁶


⁶ This is just criticising Vygotskij for his lacking of consistency and by no means a fundamental critic, because Vygotskijs approach follows the same process ontology like Leontiev.
To understand that this shift of formula did not produce any contradiction in terms of a process ontology it is necessary to continue Leontiev’s argument: Every human activity is mediated by psychic reflection that is by internal activity, having the same structure as external activity. Therefore, “the activity, that is internal in its form, originating from external practical activity“, cannot be separated from the latter, „but continues to preserve an essential, twofold connection with it“. (1963, 18) In other words, activity in its internal form mediates activity in its external form, and consciousness is determined by the real life process. “But what is human life? It is a system of activities taking turns. Within activity occurs the transition of the object into its subjective form, its image, and in the same time the transition of activity into its objective results, its products. Taking activity from this side it functions as a process realizing the mutual transitions between the poles of subject and object. Quoting Marx: <In production the person gets objectivised, in consumption things get subjectivized.>” (Leont’ev 1982, 82ff)

Thus tracing mediating reflection back to material activity and genetically explaining reflection by activity itself, this point rendered superfluous the immediate internalization of the mediational means by communication as a specific methodological element, and thus avoided the intellectualization Leontiev criticised in Vygotsky’s work. And at the same time this point renders superfluous to borrow the notion “medium” from any other approach like media theory or systems theory. I consider this a very hard confirmation of the Leontiev process ontological methodology.

So what could be the result of our reasoning as for our second issue?

1. Activity – considered an objective self movement\(^7\) – is kind of concretisation of process:
2. Its elaboration shows the history of living beings as a history of activity in the sense of autopoiesis using different forms of reflection like “irritability” and “sensibility” as well as other special forms of reflection (or psyche) – as mediating and transforming forms of activity in evolution.
3. In the same methodological sense (but with a different understanding) activity constructs the history of human mankind with the help of consciousness as a specifically human kind of reflection (psyche) or inner activity.
4. Thus activity as applied explanatory principle produces the philosophical background to understand psyche as the basic object of investigation of psychology and creates at the same time the methodology to elaborate the specific elementary structure of this psychological object.

\(^7\) Auf die Schwierigkeit, den Begriff der „gegenständlichen Tätigkeit“ angemessen ins Englische zu übersetzen, muß ausdrücklich hingewiesen werden.
5. The inner understanding of the activity notion, however, changes with its respective methodological status and must not be confused.

6. This makes clear what Leontiev means with his „basic law“ of practical activity running ahead and reflection structure lagging behind⁸: – practice is always much richer and more true than theory because theory is a reflection, a philosophy and a methodology to explain the world but not to derive it.

Although our third question is still waiting for its explicit argumentation.

III.

Is it correct to argue that Leontiev’s activity theory and present activity theoretical discourse respectively are lacking a theoretical and methodological basis to even notice the revolutionary shifts emerging from New Media and global digitalization processes? In generalised form: Is activity theory unable to effectively and productively deal with an issue of global concern like New Media? Or may we find good reasons to argue that the concepts of medium – as well as other categories – belong to the genuine and fundamental methodological properties Leontiev and activity theory are practically and implicitly working with?

Possibly some of you know about the small controversy between Yrjö Engeström and myself, I made up some years ago concerning the difference between tool and medium. Today – and this is my leading thesis – I am convinced we are both right and wrong at the same time. In other words: In a certain sense this controversy is superfluous, (in another sense however still necessary. I will come back to this issue lateron). It is not only possible but necessary to understand the medium issue in terms of process ontology as well. We just need to go one step further as we did before.

Remember the seemingly contrary mediation formula of Vygotsky object – tool/sign – subject and Leontiev object – activity – subject. In fact, understanding both formula in terms of process ontology there is no contradiction because objects as well as tools are congealed or hold processes. The real difference between “tool” and “medium” is the difference of logical types. I try to show this difference using a scheme:

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⁸ „The evolution of animal’s reflection of their environment … as it were, lags behind the evolution of their activity. … The development of the forms of psychic reflection is thus … a step downward shifted in relation to the evolution of the structure of the animal’s activity, so there is never a direct correspondence between them.“ (1971, 157)
As Schürmann shows, we use the term “mediation” to characterise a “2 + 1 – relation”: subject – tool – object. But to get aware of the fact that this 2 + 1 – relation takes place within another, different, more general context we have to look for a “3 within a fourth – relation”. To use an example: No fish can survive without water, but this is not because water is located between fish and food to serve as a means for finding or getting food. No, to the fish water is indispensable condition to every expression of its life, that is its activity takes place within a space which is neither object nor tool but medium of its life.

It is easy to show that human activity too takes place within the special space of a medium may it be speech, writing or typing. There is no need of referring on all those media historians or media scientists who did lot of research to argue this thesis although they provide us with many helpful and fruitful empirical data. Our problem is rather the question of whether we may consider even the medium of concrete activities in terms of activity itself.

And this is the moment to confess that I was wrong to say no, it is not. On the contrary, if process ontology is right in insisting that every inner moment of activity - including development, change, shift, expansion, transition or transformation and so on - are inner moments of activity itself then there is no need at all of looking for a specific phenomenon like a medium coming from outside activity. On the contrary it must be fully sufficient to study activity and its inner conditions and movements in terms of process ontology. In doing so we can say that activity is a system that not only creates new systems but uses those self produced systems as a medium of its own further development. Mediation changes its form from tool to medium and back – according to its status of object of investigation or explanatory principle. Or in philosophical terms: mediality is a genuine methodological moment of activity.

As for Leontiev I would say that he is actually working with this understanding at least since his post doctoral thesis in 1941 and his well known work “Problems of development of psyche” from 1959 – although we may find this idea in his manuscripts of the late 30ies –, and I would really like to explain this by going through his writings in details, particularly considering the fact that this could possibly throw a new light on Leontiev’s understanding of the formation and transformation concepts in general and the consequences for intervention strategies in particular.

But for now it may be sufficient to draw a conclusion. Activity theory considered a process ontology includes not only “mediality” in principle but comprises at least six basic methodological principles which I express in an imperative mood as follows:

1. Consider activity as process.
2. Consider activity as structure.
3. Consider activity as system.
4. Consider activity as medium.
5. Consider activity as co-evolution.
6. Consider activity as reflection

Of course, all of these methodological principles are interdependent, and they have of course to be commented in details.

But this is possibly an issue of discussion.

I thank you for your attention.

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