FROM WITHIN OUR LIVES TOGETHER
– WITTGENSTEIN, VYGOTSKY, BAKHTIN,
AND THE NATURE OF DIALOGICAL INQUIRY

1) BAKHTIN AND WITTGENSTEIN: DIALOGICALITY AND (A POETIC APPROACH TO) THE UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURE

“The control of society over individuals is not conducted only through consciousness or ideology, but also in the body and with the body. For capitalist society biopolitics is what is most important, the biological, the somatic, the corporeal” (Foucault, La naissance de la medicine sociale, in Dits et Ecrits, Gallimard, 1994).

“We find that the principle of these origins of both language and of letters lies in the fact that the first gentile peoples... were poets who spoke in poetic characters” (Vico, 1968, para.34).

“... but they, in their robust ignorance, did it by virtue of a wholly corporeal imagination” (Vico, 1968, para.376).

“The origin and primitive form of the language-game is a reaction: only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language - I want to say - is a refinement, ‘in the beginning was the deed’” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p.31).

Abstract: Culture is produced, said Vico, neither “by a blind concourse of atoms,” nor “by a deaf [inexorable] chain of cause and effect,” but in events of a third kind: social or joint, dialogically structured, poetic events. Such events are extraordinary. We have not yet fully grasped how in Social Theory to deal with their non-rational, impulsive, only “once-occurrent” nature (to use a term of Bakhtin’s). Although shown or displayed in the activities distributed between those involved them, the meaning of such co-constructed poetic events cannot, initially, be accessible to conscious reflection or discussion nor can they be given deliberate expression. In my paper I will explore the sometimes surprising consequences of seeing all our more elaborated and refined mental activities as having their origins in our living, spontaneous, embodied reactions both to Others and othernesses in our immediate surroundings. Besides Vico, Wittgenstein and Bakhtin (and also Vygotsky) saw the origins of all our culturally developed mentalities in such responsive, dialogically structured events, in those of our actions we first do impulsively, in ‘response’, so to speak, to the actions of the others around us. Accepting that we only make sense of our lives from within such events, has revolutionary consequences for both our theories and our methods in psychological research.

2) RENOUNCING “THE WAY OF THEORY:” INSERTING A WITTGENSTEINIAN PRACTICE INTO OUR EVERYDAY PRACTICES

Abstract: In the West, we have been obsessed with locating single, central controlling agencies - “ruling illusions” (Marx and Engels called them) - in terms of which all that can be observed within a field of study can be said ‘to hang together’. In the study of human behavior, whatever approach is adopted, the final aim is always to state the results in terms of something very like systems of rules, principles, or policies. As if all our practices are conducted by us as rational agents regulating or monitoring our own behavior by reference to such systems. I will discuss some of the problems with this obsession with what I call “the way of theory” in the first half of my paper. Wittgenstein’s (1953) account is very different. Beginning with our living, spontaneous, embodied responses to each other, he outlines the chaotic methods we use in
developing and implementing our everyday practices: giving examples is central, but we also need to give other kinds of hints, use metaphors, instructive and directive talk, and make a myriad other twists and turns. While our language is rooted in our spontaneous, living reactions to each other, it is “variously rooted, it has roots, not a single root,” he says (1981, no.656) - its meaningfulness does not have a single, ruling center; it is dispersed everywhere out in our lives together. If we want to understand how meanings are made, we can only do it by going out to study it in the many different spheres of our lives in concrete detail. Wittgenstein’s methods for drawing our attention to the crucial phenomena in such studies are of great importance. I will discuss these in the second half of my paper. To develop new everyday practices, it is Wittgenstein’s practice that we must put into our practices, theories are of no help to us.

3) BEING ‘MOVED’ BY THE EMBODIED, RESPONSIVE-EXPRESSIVE ‘VOICE’ OF AN ‘OTHER’

Abstract: An important aspect of our verbal communication with those around us, is our uttering or voicing (as 1st-person agents, as an ‘I’) of certain expressions that ‘tell’ others of ourselves, of our feelings and judgments, of our ways of relating ourselves to our circumstances. Thus, when confronted with the expressive movements of another human being, there is a whole collection of dynamically interrelated events – to do with what is expected or anticipated at each moment in their temporal unfolding – which we cannot ‘see’, which are in fact ‘invisible’ to us, but which are crucial in determining their ‘meaning’ for us. It is in terms of the expectations and anticipations they engender, that we can ‘go on’ in relation to their movements. We can represent states of affairs external to our selves in the static patterns or forms present in our spoken words, i.e., in words used in accord with existing conventions. However, in the unique, unfolding temporal ‘movement’ of our words in their speaking we can reveal of own unique ‘inner lives’. This is the power, so to speak, in Wittgenstein’s (1953) appeal to what we say in our ordinary, everyday talk. For here, in this sphere of language use, it is not a question of what a person’s words mean, but of what the person means in saying them – the sense in which their words are an expression of what matters to them in their own inner worlds, their own inner lives.

4) VYGOTSKY AND CONSCIOUSNESS AS CON-SCIENTIA, AS WITNESSABLE KNOWING ALONG WITH OTHERS

Abstract: All our higher mental functions are mediated processes, says Vygotsky, and signs are the basic means used to master and direct them. But how can this be if our words and other signs work only in a purely representational, ‘picturing’ fashion? For they still need interpreting as to their meaning. The ‘inner observation’ problem remains unsolved. Our significant expressions must also work on us in another way: by the living expressions of others producing spontaneous bodily reactions from us. The approach taken, then, in the article below, is that consciousness is a socially responsive elaboration of our animal sensitivities to, and awareness of, events occurring in our relations to the others and othernesses in our surroundings. Thus, far from it being a special, private, inner theater or workshop of the mind, its emergence depends completely on the intertwining or intermingling of our ‘inner lives’ with the ‘inner’ lives of those around us. In this view, our consciousness then becomes no more strange to us than the fact of our ‘livingness’ – a fact that is at once both ordinary in the sense of being very familiar to us in our daily practical lives, as well as being quite extraordinary to us in our intellectual lives. This talk is thus, just as much an exploration of the move from mechanical modes of thought to those appropriate to living processes, as it is about consciousness.