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Letter from A.N. Leontiev to L.S. Vygotsky

February 5, 1932

Moscow

Dear Lev Semenovich,

Tomorrow I am leaving for Kh[arko]v, I have bought the ticket and sent the telegram—tomorrow is the ultimate deadline for my “self-determination” in this complicated, torturously difficult situation that has come to pass *here* and *there*.

A huge number of questions of vital importance and immeasurable difficulty must be resolved tomorrow. It is clear to me: if knots cannot be untied, then in *extreme cases* they are cut. This is one of those *extreme cases*. And for this reason I will be cutting them.

The facts are stubborn: this does not mean that they should not be resisted; it seems to me that they must be taken in with greater boldness and clarity. For today, the central fact for me is the fact of my *factual* isolation. Our *big* discussion did not take place, and I cannot accept this as a “silent” fact—it speaks volumes. I do not want to guess and cannot guess and construct presumptions—I will not take it upon myself to decode it. I simply *take it into consideration*.

And this means that I am forced to act on the assumption that that talk is *completely impossible*. The first conclusion and the first step is a letter. First of all I want “to state my position” (please excuse the silly

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Translated by Nora Favorov.

Notes renumbered for this edition.—Eds.

expression—I don't have time to think through how I should express myself!) vis-à-vis you, to *conclude* the conversation started *by me*—the monologue. Let it be a monologue, that is, words that *do not require an answer*.

You yourself understand that now we, as a group of people bound by ideas, are undergoing a tremendous crisis. With such crises, internal conflicts are not resolved simply and without pain. In most cases they are resolved with a bullet.

The external circumstances, their tremendous pressure on us all, the ceaseless “102–104” [?] situation, the flooding from around every corner, *the mismatch between the movement of thought and the organizational, external side of work*, the lack of movement forward with concrete work, while, at the same time, there is an expansion of ideas (a mistake on the part of some of us = A.R. [Luria]!)—all of this has suppressed, undermined, and shattered our work as a *common* effort. The very system of ideas is in *tremendous* danger (before me now is a document—a *partial program for psychology on the scale of the Soviet Union, from a brigade consisting of Ved[enov], Shvarts, Akimov, Sapir,¹ and so on*—based on a draft by A.R. [Luria]). The I[nstitu]te² is working (is trying to work) according to *our* plans. This is an *alienation* of our ideas. This is the beginning of a total downfall, a collapse of the system.

And for this reason, I feel it is my duty to scream about this, to sound the alarm. It is not by chance that I put this question before you, I have been hesitating for a long time. It seems to me that I have done the right thing; here is what you yourself wrote to me two years ago (I have kept some of your letters that were dear to me, and now, at a critical moment, I am rereading them): “So, the strictest monastic regime of thought; ideological reclusiveness, when necessary. Demanding this from others. To clarify that to study cultural psychology is nothing to joke around with, not something to do on the side, amid other matters, not grounds for the inventions of each new person. And from this, externally the same organizational regime . . . *I am firmly relying on your initiative and role in protecting this*” (1929).

I have not forgotten the last phrase, and I am sounding the alarm.

I am not in hysterics—I do not think that we need to part ways, that you need to remain without us, alone (perhaps this is your spontaneous decision, yes?). It is necessary to take the *fight* further! It is necessary.

We have a wonderful and dedicated group of three to four people, certainly, *who will be tested* for clarity and reliability (A.V. [Zaporozhets],

L.I. [Bozhovich], N.G. [Morozova] . . . , perhaps others. They obligate us). *We must not fail this test!*

Where are the paths? How to continue? On which path?

I can only answer this in the words of Ibsen's Brant:

"On any path, but direct to the goal.

The steeper the path, The straighter and shorter it will be."³

I am calling you. This must appear ridiculous to you. *I am calling you!* This is the last thing that I can do in terms of our *common work*. Decide: I am ready to accept your refusal—let our paths part, *external paths*, for I do not believe in the possibility of a parting of *ideas*. I want you to understand the most important thing: I am not presenting any type of change; I am not obligating you to do anything, I am not asking anything of you: I am just saying what I consider myself obligated to say, obligated first and foremost to myself!

I will try to find my path without you, perhaps it will lie *outside* psychology . . . perhaps I may not have the strength to work alone, without you, to do the work the way it should be done, *and I do not want to compensate with words I have thought up, or botched*. Perhaps I will find a way to use my *principal* characteristics: decisiveness, courage, and steadfastness . . . This is the last thing I can give to this, to "what is ours." How?—I don't know.

"There is a certain advantage," you wrote to me, "in *I[nstrumental] P[sychology] becoming an unfavorable occupation*. . . . I cannot stress strongly enough how high (also in an ethical sense) I place thoughts of maximal purity and the precision of an idea. This is our main task—against intermingling 'settling in.'"

How I regret now that it did not turn out that way!

The fate of the great grinder—its greatness, augmented by the realization that he was not alone, the realization of support, the understanding of even two to three people, but *living people!*⁴ *That which turns a chimera into reality!*—Do you remember this thought of yours?

Concerning our *personal* relations. Here again I cannot refrain from quoting you—accept this last (I promise!) quote:

"In one thing I support you to the end and I see this as our maximum organizational precision and self-restraint—these are the keys to both the internal purity of research *and* this is the supreme law, *and the purity of personal relations*." Thus, personal relations are resolved together with the resolution of the fundamental problem. They are automatically

restored with the restoration of a connection through ideas. This is a true thought. And I also *truly* understood it.

Now two last issues: my attitude toward A.R. [Luria] and my attitude toward work.

A quick word about the first:

At the cost of *any* amount of pain, *any* amount of cruelty, it is necessary to show ones cards. I am showing mine.

*J'accuse:*⁵

Only the fundamentals:

1) A lack of understanding of the path, of perspective, a lack of understanding that C[ultural] Ps[ychology] is *also a philosophical* system, that is, it cannot be *adapted* to one or another system of phil[osophical] dogmas. Its philosophy is *not mechanistically* added to it! Tons of mistakes come from here: “friends” from the admin[istration?], attempts to reconcile the “external” and “internal,” eclecticism, *formal usage of the concepts of C[ultural] P[sychology]* (they “unlock” problems of not understanding in the abstr[act], while *research* is conducted within the system of given concepts!), thoughts of the type “The healthy core of Cultural Psychology is sociogenesis, the rest is just drivel, just intelligentsia nonsense,” and so on.

2) An incorrect attitude toward idealist[ic] systems.

3) *Entrepreneurism*, an *incorrect* attitude toward the piaterka* that came close to breaking them (but did *not* break them!), and special, *valuable* personal relationships that could have been destroyed.

4) An incorrect attitude toward C[ultural] P[sychology] itself. An *underestimation of it* (however paradoxical that might sound!), that is, perhaps it was a matter of *overestimation*, but it was *utilitarian*, speculative, to put it crudely!

I am putting all this terribly primitively and terribly curtly, but there’s no time to develop it and I do not want to gloss over it—better to exaggerate in this direction. You, of course, will make your own corrections, you yourself will fill in the blanks and will understand correctly.

Lastly: what I myself think of C[ultural] P[sychology].

Also terribly briefly:

*The five young followers of Vygotsky were known as the piaterka (piat’ is the number 5 in Russian). They were A. Zaporzhets, L. Bozhovich, L. Slavina, R. Levin, and N. Morozova.—Eds.

1. Exploiting the tenets of Cultural Psychology (applying them to concr[ete] problems) *outside* the main tasks of their own further development is now impossible. It violates the logic of research and leads to the flattening of its main concepts.

2. The logic of the development of the Cultural Psychology system leads today to the necessity of placing at the center of attention the problem of the philosophical interpretation of its fundamental concepts and tenets (the difference between the factual content of research and the degree of development of their philosophical foundations, the *worldview* upon which they rest. “The tyranny of the pictogram”).

3. This problem (I return to it now in this context!) cannot be solved at the cost of adapting Cultural Psychology to a “standard,” or, to put it another way, it cannot be *mechanistically* thrust into one philos[ophical] context or another. It is itself a *philosophical* system (*psychological philosophy!*—a worldview!).

4. Now it is necessary, to *clearly* pose the testing and at the same time to raise *fundamental* questions like: the workplace (to liquidate cancel out the vulgar banality of “trudovism”),⁶ and consequently the problem of the mediation of development (I think: *cultural* development!); the problem of our own specific laws, immanent to *psycholog[ical]* development. Perhaps even the concept of the mental-psychological, the fundamental paths to the study of the mental, that is, *how* this is possible in principle (maybe perhaps using physics as our guide—our beacon!). Most important: *personality*, as the subject of psychological development, that is, the problem of *active* ps[ychological] development, the problem of the *psych[ological] culture* of personality (of freedom!), and from here the closest *ethical* problems.

5. In addition to these it is essential to work out theoretical questions, directly guiding specific research.

It seems to me that among them belong: (a) The problem of F[unctional] S[ystems]: “possible” (i.e., something like quantum) I[nter]f[unctional] relations and “possible” functions of functions (after all a system is not a spring salad, but something presupposing only the *possible*, i.e., *certain* combinations); (b) Determination of i[nter]f[unctional] relations (the conditions under which they arise, the process of their birth, factors (= determinants); here an experiment in their *artificial* formation is necessary, that is, a “dynamic argument” is needed, an experiment along the lines of “ingrowth”). Here, it is necessary to think through the place, the role of

the sign; my belief, or more precisely, my intuition here is that the sign is the key! Roughly speaking, the first operations with quantities involve perception, further, the f[unctional] s[ystem] of perception, an intell[ectual] operation. What has transformed the *perc[eption] of quantities*—this simple operation, into a higher intell[ectual] function? The inclusion of a unique sign—the *concept* of numbers, that is, the sign, a medium of intell[ect] (thought!). If this *concept* is real, then perception, operations with quantities using *it* specifically, is also included in a syst[em] of conceptual thought. This is all *very* crude and the example has *not* turned out successfully (it seems—there is no time to think!); (c) The problem “intellect–will,” that is, the problem (figuring out the problem!) of *intention* (this is *already* a given!); and (d) personality as a syst[em] expressed in concr[ete] problems, that is, *how it is formulated*.

6. These theoretical questions do not coincide with the fundamental, general problems (they do not equate), although they are not neutral toward one another. They are connected in a *system*, that is, organically, but (most important!) they do not convert into one another “projectively” (projective geometry).

The relation between these second two theoretical problems and research is exactly *projective* (i.e., the relation of the transition of some into the others through projective transformation—by means of projection of the same data *on different planes*).

I have also expressed this very unclearly, the most important thought is here—not to dissolve one into the other. It is necessary to separate philosophical problems, *as such* they are *not* solved experimentally, research only provides their *indirect* testing and development. Further: specific theoretical tenets, *regulating*, guiding concr[ete] research must be projected directly into resear[ch]. Here, is a merging, but the larger it is (it is necessary!), the more precisely they must be separated out in *formulating* the problem. That is, in any research it must be clear *what* theoret[ical] problem is being solved and *what* is being given to C[ultural] P[sychology].

It seems that this is the most important in regard to the last question.

I am writing all this so that my relation to the most important thing will be as clear to you as possible (I’m limited by the size of the letter!).

So, again I will return to myself.

It is frightening to think of the future. The feeling of isolation is a tremendous burden. Our conversation that never took place—your lack

of participation in it (perhaps you are right!)—is a verdict, a decision, a decision silently expressed. It seems more and more apparent that it will be necessary for me to leave ps[ychology]. I cannot work *alone* with A.R. [Luria]. I cannot cope on my own (I don't have the preparation, schooling, etc.), at least if I do not find an *exceptional* solution. Until the spring—a torturous stay in Kharkov. Torturous because (you *must* understand this!) I *definitely* cannot continue with things as they have been in recent times (internally, in terms of ideas).

Could it really be that you are right, that now salvation is really in your working alone (in the sense of the liquidation of stopping our common work as *common*)?

I remember your proud “hier stehe ich”⁷— it means it is not by mere chance, it means what is so hard to believe—necessity?

With you it seemed to me that it was still possible to straighten *everything*, smooth things over with A.R., raise the spirits, cut away something, painfully liquidate something else (perhaps a breaking off of relations with A.R.—it is so hard even to write this!), to find new possibilities. In a word, *to pass the exam*.

The last thing is difficult: we will all meet each other (possibly) in our work together. Will it really be the way it was, but new? Not as it was *before*, but in a *new* way? So all will need to be rearranged with Lebedinskii,⁸ since my expectation here was of work under cover (precision, differentiation—I am almost certain— would have made it possible).

And so, my unexpectedly long monologue (in my own defense, I can only refer to the famous “I did not have time to write a shorter letter”) is coming to an end. Speaking honestly—I'm glad that I wrote this letter. I have done everything here that I could. I am not asking you to answer me. I am free in a certain sense; I have done everything that I could, I have clarified everything *about myself* with you. I hope I will manage to do the same with A[lexander] R[omanovich].

I do not need to tell you that I, least of all, could hold any grievances against you.

Yours, A. Leontiev

Notes

1. A.V. Vedenov, L.M. Shvarts, and I.D. Sapir were employees of the Institute of Psychology, Pedology, and Psychotechnics in the 1930s.

2. The Institute of Psychology, which in 1932 was called the Institute of Psychology, Pedology, and Psychotechnics.

3. From a [Russian] translation by A. V. Kovalenskii: “The paths are equal:/They all lead to the goal/ . . . The shortest of all is the steep path” (H. Ibsen, “Brand,” in *Collected Works* [Sobr. soch.], 4th ed., vol. 2 [Moscow, 1956], p. 347).

4. Evidently, this is a reference to B. Spinoza, whose primary profession as a lens grinder, and whose fate and ideas served as models for L.S. Vygotsky in many ways (see Vygotsky’s letter below [not translated here—Ed.]).

5. In French: I accuse. This is the name of a famous pamphlet by E. Zola written in connection with the sensational, fabricated “Dreyfus Affair.”

6. Evidently this is a reference to the theory and practice of professional training and education gaining currency in Soviet pedagogy.

7. In German: “Here I stand,” a famous aphorism of Martin Luther.

8. M.S. Lebedinsky was a psychiatrist who worked at one time with A.R. Luria, was invited to Kharkov along with Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Luria, and worked there for several years.

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