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Universidad del Zulia
Facultad Experimental de Ciencias
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas
Maracaibo - Venezuela

Comparative analysis of the philosophical heritage of B.F. Porshnev

Margarita P. Arutyunyan

Pacific National University, Khabarovsk, Russian Federation

1569009386@pnu.edu.ru

Nikita V. Kishkin

I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University (Sechenov University), Moscow, Russian Federation

kishkin.nv@lmsmu.ru

Olga I. Rukavishnikova

³Pacific National University, Khabarovsk, Russian Federation

010039@pnu.edu.ru

Elena G. Sakhnovskaya

Ural State University of Railway Transport, Ekaterinburg, Russian Federation

ESakhnovskaya@usurt.ru

Lyudmila V. Pyatiletova

Ural State University of Railway Transport, Ekaterinburg, Russian Federation

LPyatiletova@usurt.ru

Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of nervous activity and its ability to generate any kind of subjective self-awareness via comparative qualitative research methods. As a result, a Soviet historian and an outstanding thinker who wondered about the beginning of human history created a model of consciousness that is very close to Metzinger's theory of consciousness. In conclusion, the article is to honor the memory of Boris F. Porshnev and to support Thomas Metzinger's theory of consciousness in order to provide an independent and emerging confirmation of his ideas in a completely different ideological environment.

Keywords: Consciousness, Paleopsychology, Signaling, Dominant focus.

Análisis comparativo de la herencia filosófica de B.F. Porshnev

Resumen

El artículo está dedicado al estudio de la actividad nerviosa y su capacidad para generar cualquier tipo de autoconciencia subjetiva a través de métodos comparativos de investigación cualitativa. Como resultado, un historiador soviético y un pensador sobresaliente que se preguntó sobre el comienzo de la historia humana creó un modelo de conciencia muy cercano a la teoría de la conciencia de Metzinger. En conclusión, el artículo es para honrar la memoria de Boris F. Porshnev y apoyar la teoría de la conciencia de Thomas Metzinger para proporcionar una confirmación independiente y emergente de sus ideas en un entorno ideológico completamente diferente.

Palabras clave: Conciencia, Paleopsicología, Señalización, Enfoque dominante.

1. INTRODUCTION

In our research, we compare the creative heritage of the two very different thinkers and their work devoted to the problem of the model of consciousness. Therefore, they should be introduced first. Boris Porshnev was a historian involved in sociological and philosophical studies. However, Porshnev's talents were appreciated by the international audience only in a few fields of his work. He is considered to be a major historian of the 17th-18th centuries. In French

medieval studies of the 1920s and 1940s, his works were referred to as “le temps porshnevien” (BERNSTEIN, 2003). He is also one of the first Soviet social psychologists. He made a contribution to the theoretical analysis of economic and social life and studied the problem of relict paleoanthropes (the so-called “Yeti Bigfoot”).

PORSHNEV (1974) believed that his work “On the Beginning of Human History (Problems of Paleopsychology)” was the book of his life and basic scientific research. He clearly realized that the “beginning of human history” gives a clue to the scientific disciplines studying “social individual and human society”. This makes all research fragments related, combining them into a single research program. It is the book “On the Beginning of Human History (Problems of Paleopsychology)” that presents the model of consciousness constructed by PORSHNEV (1974) in an attempt to bridge the Cartesian abyss.

METZINGER (2009), the Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, is one of the greatest philosophy of mind scholars. His book “The Ego Tunnel. Science of Mind and the Myth of the Self” was published in 2009. This is an adapted edition of his ideas presented in “Being No One”, which became a bestseller pretty quickly. The book summarizes modern scientific knowledge on human consciousness and is full of absolutely breathtaking facts and conclusions about personality, free will, conscious dreams, artificial consciousness, etc. In the introduction, the

author says: “In this book, I will try to convince you that there is no “self”. Contrary to what most people believe, no one has ever been themselves and had the self” (WOOLHOUSE, 2002: AMEEN ET AL, 2018).

2. METHODOLOGY

To understand the origins of the problem of the philosophy of consciousness, it is necessary to pay attention to the Cartesian paradigm. This is a set of ideas about the relationship between consciousness and matter that was first formulated by the 17th-century philosopher Rene Descartes; however, it was taken as the basis for some integral approach by many philosophers, including Spinoza (GARRETT, 1996), Leibniz (HALDANE, 1954), Malbranche (MALYSHEVA, 2018) and others. It corresponds to the intuitive self-perception; it is most likely that when humanity first thought about the essence of consciousness and what distinguishes a person from an animal and natural phenomena, the Cartesian paradigm was the first problem formulation. The credit is due to Descartes who was the first to record what bothered philosophers of the Renaissance. Essentially, the Cartesian Paradigm can be briefly described by the following provisions:

1. Body and soul are two different substances. They have opposite properties;

2. Body is a machine controlled by reflexes;
3. Consciousness is identical to thinking;
4. A conscious being has direct access to consciousness and is able to control thinking;
5. A conscious being is also able to control the body. It is postulated that the interaction of substances takes place in a mysterious place.
6. A subject is a single whole possessing indivisible consciousness.

Although these provisions seem intuitive, a general empirical observation suggests that when deciding between common sense and counter-intuitive provisions, it is precisely the counter-intuitive idea that will be scientifically valid (GUZZETTI, 2000). Indeed, the Cartesian Paradigm provisions have been reasonably criticized. The main difficulty of the Cartesian paradigm is related to the fifth provision: how do body and soul interact if they are two different substances? Neither Descartes nor his followers managed to answer the question. Looking further forward, we can say that until the end of the twentieth century no one could solve this problem. The word *anima* (soul) is a rare word in Descartes texts. He replaced the word *anima* with the word *mens* (mind, thought, consciousness, spirit) in

order to emphasize that the human soul is the idea and it does not include a single atom of matter. Descartes preferred to talk about the spirit (*mens*) rather than the soul as the word *anima* is ambiguous and often applied to material things (MOHR, WATTERS, & DUNCAN, 1975).

Descartes formally defined spirit as the substance characterized by direct thinking (DESCARTES, 1955). This definition makes no remark. Descartes defined substance as something to which a property is attributed. However, it is clear that Descartes saw one of the spirit abilities (an intellectual function) in the *cogito* principle and did not reduce spiritual diversity solely to thinking. But he did not introduce this distinction, regarding thinking as a function of the spirit and introducing the problem of the correlation of thinking and matter into the scientific discourse.

The subsequent philosophical beliefs were greatly influenced by Descartes' claim that consciousness (soul) is identical to thinking. It will not be a mistake to formulate the history of the issue as follows: during the 17-19th centuries, most human theories postulated the fact that to understand the human soul means to understand the laws of thinking. Of course, no one denied the importance of emotions: they were associated with the study of the basic soul content, i.e. thinking, in any superficial way or were studied separately. Moreover, in the context of the Cartesian Paradigm, emotions were often attributed to

the offspring of the body mechanism and considered external to the spirit (SCHMALTZ, 1992).

It was Descartes who opened the door to Kant's questions. First, Kant did not just appeal to the direct evidence of I, but made this evidence a working tool. First, Kant drew attention to the dual nature of self-consciousness, which contains two elements: 1) I as a subject of thinking (in logic), which means pure apperception (a purely reflecting I) and about which we have nothing to say, since this is a completely simple idea; 2) "I" as an object of perception, inner feeling, which contains a variety of definitions that make internal experience possible (BENNETT, DENNETT, DENNETT, HACKER & SEARLE, 2007). Secondly, according to the above-mentioned information, Kant tried to determine the nature of intentionality, the givenness of elements in consciousness, as well as to find the basis for distinguishing them in the acts of self-consciousness. The fact that Kant paved another way of building a model of consciousness is important for our research (BAARS, 2017).

This can be depicted as follows: the ancient thinkers recognized the peculiarity of impulses; Descartes postulated the insuperability of the abyss between consciousness and body, as well as the unrepresentability of the path between body and consciousness and separate emotions from the realm of consciousness; Kant singled out the essential part of consciousness taking out logical functions and thinking from the realm of consciousness. Psychology is still mainly

focused on the study of the laws of thinking, which are divided into the laws of perception, information processing and action control. A new approach to the study of consciousness is EDELMAN's (2015) evolutionary cognitive science (EDELMAN, 2015), the global workspace theory of consciousness by PARVIZI & DAMASIO (2001) and other theories that fit into the framework of cognitive science, which is characterized by the identification of consciousness with higher forms of information processing.

Regarding the laws of thinking, it becomes certain that philosophical systems have two opposite approaches: 1. all acts of thinking are causally defined (by previous acts, including the cognitive ones, as well as the state of the body) and 2. Thinking is free, at least to some extent. This is a philosophical problem that has not yet been solved. The validity of approach 1 for nematodes can be demonstrated through experiments (BRENNAN & PROEKT, 2018). However, this does not solve the problem because human behavior is obviously irreducible to nematode behavior patterns and the difference between the complexity of the worm and the human being is too large to draw parallels. The sixth provision has been put in brackets because neither Descartes nor other authors within the framework of the Cartesian paradigm made it the subject of special consideration. It was considered in detail, for example, by Plato and in the philosophy of the New Age by Kant.

However, in the contemporary analytic philosophy of consciousness BENNETT, DENNETT, DENNETT, HACKER & SEARLE (2007) it is always attributed to Descartes rather than Kant. This is true to some extent since it fits into the Cartesian paradigm. This provision was also being criticized in psychoanalysis. Now it is one of the central problems of philosophy, both in the continental version (the plurality of the subject in postmodern philosophy) and in Anglo-American analytic philosophy (Fodor, 1985). A summarized interpretation of the Cartesian paradigm can be reduced to the gap between nature and consciousness. The very existence of man provides at least one example of overcoming the abyss. Thus, if we want to build a consistent model of consciousness, we will have to turn to the beginning of human history.

WATTS (2006) in his work wrote a peculiar encomium to Metzinger: *Being No One* by Metzinger is the hardest book I have ever read (I still have not mastered the most part of it). I came across the most overwhelming ideas in literature and life. When it comes to the nature of consciousness, most authors become shameless flakes. Pinker calls his work *How the Mind Works* and on the first page admits that we do not know how the mind works. Koch, the man who introduced the term zombie agents, euphemistically ignores the question of why nervous activity should give rise to any kind of subjective self-awareness in his book *The Quest for Consciousness: a neurobiological approach*. Metzinger literally takes the bull by the horns.

His hypothesis explains the subjective feeling of I and makes it clear why an illusory first-person narrator should be a derivative result of certain cognitive systems. I have no idea how right he is – this is not my expertise – but at least he asked the question that makes us stare at the ceiling at three in the morning when the last cigarette has already been smoked. I have never seen the symptoms and diseases presented in *Blindsight*. Any statements or claims in this section with no references provided are likely to come from the same place. This is a pretty flattering description by the nominee for the Hugo Award for Best Novel (Hugo Nominees, 2007) and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best Science Fiction Novel (Campbell Award Winners & Nominees, 2019), as well as the winner of the Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel (Locus SF Award Winners & Nominees, 2019) and the Seyun Prize for Best Novel Translation (2014 Seiun Award Winners, 2014). Let us have a closer look and find out whether the assessment is justified.

The Metzinger model of Self, which is present in every person, considers the process of modeling the position of an individual in social space. A similar view can also be found in the works of Porshnev. The relationship with other individuals is regarded as a cause for the emergence of consciousness. Similarly, both authors solve the problem of reflexes and their role in behavior. They believe that automatic responses to environmental challenges are rationalized by consciousness. But the difference is that Porshnev looked a little ahead when studying the role of language and speech. Metzinger

parenthetically notes the fundamental difference between human language and human speech from everything that we can observe in animals. He describes the connection of the unique human model of Self with the speech centers in the Brok zone and the figurative action of grabbing that explains the functioning model of thinking.

According to Porshnev, speech is the key pillar of the anthropogenesis concept and a complex speech is built on the negation of the negation. Porshnev believed that early humans first developed the language as a means of hypnosis and thus became powerful and cruel cannibal predators. A new counter-language that allowed others to defend themselves appeared later and the modern people identified themselves as the antithesis of their ancestors. In view of this, Porshnev noted the difference that was complete and had no intermediate phases between the second-signal system of modern people – it was formed after a double separation from the animal substrate. According to Porshnev, this explains why all modern person body functions are controlled by speech, that is consciousness. Porshnev put forward the logic of negation of the negation at the origins of history.

And double negation is the only way that makes it possible to overcome the Cartesian abyss. There is nothing like human speech in animal reflexes as the negation of the negation is not peculiar to an animal; this is a completely new phenomenon that is not connected with the substrate; it has detached from the substrate and become

independent...This is the idea that Metzinger's philosophy lacks. It is symbolic that the modern philosopher can find the finishing touch for his work in the works of the old and orthodox Soviet Marxist, Boris Porshnev. We have been won over by Porshnev concept of rejecting the notorious gradually: his ideas are constructive and suggest a plausible way to bridge the abyss.

The negation of the negation is the paradoxical tool that allows bridging the gap between the animal world and modern man. The problematic communication between proto-humans is caused by the suggestive influence of one individual on another, the denial of the surrounding circumstances, the imposition of one's will on another individual, as well as by the counter-suggestive negation (which becomes the negation of the negation) that eliminates this pressure. There are no studies regarding the mechanisms of the influence of one individual on another as a decisive factor in the transformation of an animal into a human being which laid the foundation for further human evolution. Despite presenting the function of the unique model of the human Self as positioning in social space, Metzinger does not discuss this issue in his work.

3. CONCLUSION

Thomas Metzinger's and Boris Porshnev's visions of the model of consciousness are not very similar. However, the in-depth analysis

of the texts of both authors allows us to reveal deep and trustful provisions. The synchronous emphasis placed by both authors on the grasping gesture and on gestures, in general, should also be mentioned: thought as a complete gesture is an aphoristic expression found in the works of both authors. And it is no coincidence: the primary motor cortex mainly controls the organs of facial expressions, vocalization, gesture (in particular, the role of thumb is not associated with grabbing, but with its abduction when poking and pointing) rather than the organs that perform labor mechanical actions directed at nature objects. The connection of gestures with the formation of thinking and the very ability of thinking of the act of thinking as an opportunity to grab a thought allow us to conclude that both researchers came closer to the same Truth, found something valuable – something that makes us humans.

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