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## LOOKING FOR A SYMPHONY

A sort of essay with a perspective on *Activity Theories and the Ontology of Psychology: Learning from Danish and Russian Experiences* by Jens Mammen & Irina Mironenko

Asger Neumann

### Abstract:

As a perspective on Mammen and Mironenko the article is reflecting on the possibility of Activity Theory being a foundation on which Psychology could be integrated. Mammen and Mironenko point that directed activity not only is towards objects “defined as a sum of qualities, but by individual reference” is a starting point. As a specific example the phenomenon Love, as “significant object relations”, is related to the concept “choice categories”. It is stated that relations of affection and love can’t be understood independent of history of common activity, and that this makes the concept “choice categories” central in a psychological understanding of what love is.

In their paper Mammen and Mironenko (2015) refer to professor at Psychological Institute, Aarhus University, 1970-1997, Henrik Poulsen. This brings to my mind that Henrik Poulsen once in a discourse with Jens Mammen searched for an adequate metaphor for the role of Activity Theory (AT) in scientific psychology. His aim was a conception of AT as the foundation on which Psychology could be integrated. Poulsen also referred to the effort of Anthropological Psychology to find some integrating frame of reference for Psychology. This is much in line with an approach Mammen has advocated in different contexts: That we should give up the trench warfare between different psychological schools and rather search for a common model which could embrace the different schools and investigate what domain of application each of them could have.

In other words; instead of refuting the different schools as “reductionist” we should examine in which way and in which fields of understanding the different theories yield data and knowledge from which we could learn and be informed about the comprehensive domain of psychology. To take a few examples, knowledge of effects of hormones to promote certain incentives to actions could be important, but not sufficient, for our knowledge of human acts in their totality. Systemic theories can contribute with important knowledge concerning interactions in social systems, families or groups, but this also is not sufficient for understanding or predicting precisely the acts of individuals in a given context.

Henrik Poulsen found that the metaphor “Psychology as a symphony orchestra” was a qualified bet. I don’t know if it was his own invention, or if he borrowed it from elsewhere, but he had good arguments for the picture. He further argued that AT could then be seen as the conductor of the symphony orchestra. The different theories and models are the instruments contributing to the unifying music. The conductor defines the basis and the frame in which the music is functioning,

invites the instruments in and out, emphasizes and moderates their intensity. The different instruments still have their notes to play but the conductor controls their place in the musical gestalt. If each instrument insists to dominate the whole the music falls apart.

Mammen & Mironenko's (2015) reminded me of this metaphor and to view AT in that perspective. Looking at AT as a possible basis on which the different perspectives on Psychology and the psyche could be integrated is still on the agenda. In particular this means to view subjects' intentional and directed activity towards objects, their acts, as basic analytical model for human psychology and for our ties to the world. In general terms this is the subject's directed activity towards objects and it comprises our intentional and mutual relations to other humans in everyday life as key example, but also relations to more ideal objects as God, homeland, political party or even football club.

Mammen & Mironenko's (2015) emphasize that this directed activity not only is towards objects "defined as a sum of qualities, but by individual reference". This individual reference conceptualized as "choice categories" becomes according to them a fundamental pivot in Psychology. In the following I.

In my work as a psychologist these qualitative aspects in mutually directed activities between subjects are of special significance. This is the case in my psychotherapeutic work with people being challenged in their relations of affection and love and in my work as lecturer when discussing how we shall understand and describe these relations and how they appear in their complexity and diversity, theoretically and empirically.

### **AT as foundation for understanding relations of love**

Mammen & Mironenko's (2015) emphasize the limitations in cognitivist and functionalist thinking and argue that this way of understanding impedes the conceptual transcendence of human relations as governed by nothing but cynical cost-benefit judgments. They argue that this way of thinking in reality ignores the genuine human, that our relations (including love) are developed through concrete living and acting together over time, and that this causes a solidarity (including attachment and loyalty) which can't be conceived as just a summation of sensory accessible qualities of the other one. The relations of affection and love can't be understood independent of history of common activity, daily routines as well as more emotionally dramatic experiences with each other and the world.

It occurs, of course, that relations between people are governed by cynical cost-benefit judgments. But it is hard to understand love in its empirical manifestations on this basis. AT's offer of an ontology including Mammen's concept "the sense of the concrete" provides a conceptual frame for "the individual reference". As Saint-Exupéry puts it in "The little Prince" is the essential invisible to the eye (Saint-Exupéry, 1972) -- with which Mammen both agrees and disagrees. All essential qualities are perceptible, and objects may also be discriminated from each other by sensory qualities. However, this does not imply that objects can be identified or individuated as a sum of qualities, as this sum may be infinite, and in practice beyond reach. So we need another "sense" for identifying objects not only through their sensory qualities but through our continuing contact with

them in a life-history context, some “sense for the concrete”. See more comprehensive treatment of these distinctions in (Mammen, 1986, 1989).

Back to love! Attachment and love to the object/the other established through concrete common activity and life-history is the essential or general. That love is supported by liking the other due to valued qualities or sympathies is on the other hand, although not unusual, not the essential, and as I read Mammen & Mironenko’s (2015) not the defining property of love. Siblings can very well love each other without necessarily “liking each other”. In my work as psychologist for the Danish Armed Forces I have heard soldiers describing their relation to the group of men in their platoon in a way which supports this point. The loyalty and commitment they have with their comrades in the platoon, caused by the common training and professional education, one’s common emotionally and physically challenging experiences, and even acute situations of fight being responsible for each others’ life, was independent of your mutual personal sympathies. The quality of the relation was defined through your being tied together in common activity, in a common history and common conditions. This strengthened the confidence in each others’ loyalty and made you “significant objects” for each other in what could be called love. As one soldier reported: “If I had met him in a bar I would have avoided him. The way he behaved did not appeal to me. But on the battlefield I would risk my life to save him”. The relation is not supported by the perception of the other’s qualities, but grown over time with common life and with experiences of being united and tied together in common fate.

As expressed by Mammen the sense categories are not carriers of the relation. This role has the history of acting together and testifying each others’ life and feelings. This is what “can’t be seen with the naked eye”, but is expressed in an attachment which can only be understood through the concrete and particular object relations or in Mammen’s concepts is reflected in choice categories. I could have chosen more common and less extreme examples, e.g. a child’s play with his sister over their toy, which is determined more by family ties and ownership than perceptual qualities, but the distance between significant relations and relations of liking and sympathy is perhaps more noticeable in the soldier example.

If we shall understand the concrete relation of love, and if we not only see it as e.g. a general function in psychological evolution or as a relation to some “sum of qualities”, we must focus on what such a relation is referring to, concretely and individually. Only then is the relation of love comprehensible.

What is said with this?

Let’s return to Saint-Exupéry’s “The little prince”. Here the prince meets a fox who wishes to be “tamed”. “Tamed” means that from now on they know each other and is something for each other. Now they are important and mean something for each other. In the future will the fox be reminded of the prince’s yellow hair, when the wind baffles in the grain field, and will miss him. Or in other words, by being “tamed” the objective meanings of objects are filled with subjective and personal sense. The relations become object relations (Mammen, 1986), they gain concrete and specific sense. The objects are not only evaluated instrumentally in relation to relevant situations, they gain

a new potentiality of positive and negative emotional values beyond functionality. In AT and in Leontiev's theory it is not quite clear if subjective sense is tied to general and functional categories of concrete or ideal objects with same objective meaning. In Mammen's understanding it is, however, emphasized that subjective sense is tied to concrete and particular objects, i.e. to objects' numerical identity and not their qualitative identity. "The little prince" reaches the same conclusion as M & M. The time he uses on his rose is also the time which yields the rose subjective, personal sense, and it is this particular rose, not roses as a general category or the objective meaning of roses.

### **Attachment, love and object relations**

This is in many ways close to Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) about how the human child through the evolution has acquired a capacity and an inclination to "attach" to concrete others. We are, according to Bowlby, born with a "program" to link ourselves with ties to concrete others, typically mother, father, older brothers and sisters, and they in the same way link and attach to the infant and child by certain types of activity, emotional expressions, empathy, gestures, facial expressions, activation of certain hormones, etc. This process is not established only instinctively, it also demands relevant acts of some quality to succeed. Adults can be impaired in their capacity to satisfy these demands. They can be damaged in the development of empathy and emotional communication with the child and can as a consequence ignore the child's needs and sufferings and in this way damage the child's attachment or make it vulnerable. In AT terms a set of adequate acts and operations are necessary if the developmental process shall succeed, and typically this is accomplished through acts with conscious as well as unconscious intentions. Developmental psychology and empirical facts about neuro-affective development can supply with much knowledge here (Hart, 2008). The function of the attachment in an evolutionary perspective is to secure the child's survival and development. In the individual level this means that an attachment is established as a concrete link between the child and the significant others. New links and objects of attachment are established throughout life, but the old ties and their qualities are not easily "broken". An object-relation is seen from the object an addition of subjective and personal sense. Seen from the subject it is a tie between cognitive judgments and emotions created through experiences and activities with the object. In situations of surplus the emotions become joyful, in situations of deficit they become worrying or scaring.

In this respect love is a crucial object relation, in beginning of life because we are vitally dependent of others, a more self-directed and demanding relation, later in life when we not only shall function with others in a community but also take care of our children and disabled people, it is a more altruistic and giving relation.

Henrik Poulsen (1991) emphasizes in line with this the importance of not just understanding love as an emotion or feeling, but as the special quality of a "tie" to an object, in the form of a sentiment or an affection. Because this particular object is important to us it can provoke all possible emotions and feelings, but without weakening the basic relation of love. According to Poulsen love is "... an enduring disposition for emotions" (Poulsen, 93, p. 47). My wife can make me frustrated but my love is intact. The sight of her can make me happy and elevated but at other times an expression of

unhappiness in her eyes can make me concerned or sad. The link and tie is the same but the emotions accompanying it changes all the time. Poulsen emphasizes that this tie to another human has different aspects and qualities. It can express an “I care about my loved one, about his/her situation and well-being, needs and wishes”. One aspect of this is according to Poulsen that love in general implies to take responsibility for the other. I recognize the other as important and take up the task of being responsible. This often involves anxiety and uncertainty about ability and capacity to live up to the task and this is the accompanying challenge of love.

### **Agape and Eros**

Poulsen (1991) is leaning on the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren’s concepts of “Agape” and “Eros” as two sides of love and describes love as having a “giving” and a “receiving” side. Poulsen relates this to Leontiev’s theory of evolution or phylogenesis where it is crucial for the human consciousness that we are able to, at the same time, to perceive the object’s personal sense “for me” and its objective meaning independent of me but in its relations to society and common human praxis. The Agape side of love is, as motivation and as activity, to be concerned with and engaged in the other’s life and fate in a way reaching beyond one self, and so to say without any profit except the joy of seeing the other thrive or opposite worry if this fails or is threatened. You are acting “for” and “with” the other. The Eros side of love, on the other hand, is rather the “for me” side. Here the motives are ones own needs. They can be a desire for being together with the other and a demand for what the other can give and the joy of experiencing the other’s taking care and fulfilling my needs and longings.

An important point is here, according to Poulsen, that these two sides of love not only are mental entities, but are realized as activities or acts towards the other or as a demand on the other. The soldier risks his life for the other and expects the same from his comrade. The sister drives out at 3 a. m. to catch her brother home from a self-destructive pub crawl and expects that he the next day helps with painting her room. If the comrade or the brother does not live up to the reciprocity the trust is challenged. It should be added that the Agape dominated love – not necessarily reciprocal – is easier to practice in the asymmetric relations parents children or grandparents grandchildren than in symmetric relations between adults including the “romantic” love. In Kundera’s “The Unbearable Lightness of Being” the principle character Maria tells that the love to her dog is more beautiful than the love to her husband as she always enjoys the happiness of the dog and sees that the reverse is also the case, but she curses her husband when she imagines him happy with another woman.

A central quality with a successful adult relation of love is therefore, according to Poulsen, that there is reciprocity, that there is a fair balance between Eros and Agape between giving and receiving, between desire and devotion. To act in accordance with the other’s needs and peculiarities but at the same time feel appreciated and valued through the other’s acting in the same way. Much conflict, suffering and pain in relations of love is about not experiencing this reciprocity. But, once more, reciprocity is not the ultimate condition for love. Without further proof

we also find examples showing that love can be strong, both dominated by Agape and Eros and without much reciprocity. In these cases it is, however, more painful to live with.

### **Two aspects of perception**

Sternberg (2006) finds in his investigations that love can be seen as a syndrome put together of three basic elements. In addition to intimacy and passion he finds commitment as a basic constituent in love and he describes it as a decision to commit oneself towards the other. In commitment in a more narrow sense there is a promise of faithfulness, but in a more general sense it is a decision taken consciously or not of loyalty, of being responsible for the other and over time to act with respect for the other's needs and well-being.

This understanding of love, going out from Poulsen's definitions, corresponds very well with my interpretation of Mammen & Mironenko's (2015) paper and its emphasis on sense categories and choice categories as two aspects of perception and cognition, including affective relations. Where sense categories help discriminating and categorizing objects in space and time choice categories help to identify particular and concrete objects, our specific ties to the objects and their ties to other significant objects. Some of the ties have intense emotional value, others less important are more neutral.

In my understanding the sense categories help me to recognize an object as another human. Further it helps me through my perception to interpret and recognize the other's condition. Knowledge about neuro-affective development, empathy and the functioning of mirror neurons could be relevant here and help explaining the capacities of interpersonal perception. To dive into phylo- and ontogenesis could further contribute to how these capacities have developed and became a fundamental competence in human life. It could supply with hypotheses of how there is a general tendency in the meeting between humans to see the other as a subject appealing for recognition and appreciation. Referring to Løgstrup (Løgstrup, 1956) this recognition and appreciation is fundamental and if it does not happen spontaneously something has failed in this person's development, perhaps insufficient attachments impeding the development of basic interpersonal competences. At this place I just conclude that evolution and individual experiences are crucial for the perception and recognition of another human as something having value "in itself" independent of what the other can do or be "for me".

The choice categories, on this general background, help me to recognize the particular other in his or her specific relations to the world and to me and further through my emphatic capacity to understand the other's specific perspective on living in the world. In other words, I am able to acknowledge that the other has his or her choice categorical relation to the world. Here could be referred to theory-of-mind, mentalizing, etc. but my point is just that I do not only see the other as something having value independent of me, but also that the other has his or her specific choice categorical relations to the world. What the other in this way actively has linked to can have value just because it is appreciated by the other. "I understand that the – in my view - rather ugly painting in front of me shall be treated carefully and with dignity because it is produced by my friend's

grandchild and from that reason is appreciated by him". The crucial is that I as a human can perceive and relate in this way and act accordingly.

### **In Conclusion**

In this perspective on Mammen & Mironenko's (2015) article I have focused on its conceptual linkage between choice categories and solidarity and tried to illuminate it with love as a key concept. The article's critique of functionalism and its argumentation for a realistic understanding of interpersonal perception, activity and relations through an introduction of choice categories as a fundamental concept has made this more transparent. It also enabled a transcendence of the difficulties functionalistic thinking has had understanding and explaining relations of love and their basis in the human individual's capacity for perceiving and maintaining relations to what is unique, concrete and particular.

To sum up is the introduction of choice categories as a key concept in my view an important contribution to Psychology. Further Mammen & Mironenko's (2015) article emphasizes AT's potential as a general and including paradigm in Psychology. It enables a comprehensive understanding of love, not in opposition to but as an expansion of evolutionary thinking and its continuation in ontogenesis.

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