

Peer Review

Review of: "Inner Speech, Self-Regulation, and the Modular-with-Feedback Theory of Free Will"

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I'm afraid I can't attempt to tackle every argument or piece of evidence that the authors make use of in their argument about the relationship between 'free will' and 'inner speech'. I find their approach deeply flawed in general, largely because of the communicational assumptions that form the starting point and framework for their argument, and for that reason can only recommend that they take a look at an alternative perspective on communication, including self-communication, set out in Roy Harris's 1996 book, *Signs, Language and Communication*. I drew on Harris's perspective in my own critique of Vygotsky's (and Luria's) own claims about linguistic self-communication ('egocentric' and 'inner' (or 'private') speech) and its role in the formation of voluntary behaviour in my 2009 paper, 'From "external speech" to "inner speech" in Vygotsky: a critical appraisal and fresh perspectives'. *Language & Communication*, 29 (2): 166-181. The basic issues I raised there are substantially the same as I would raise in response to this paper.

But I'm not saying the paper should not be published as it stands; the authors are entitled to their opinion, and my own perspective is perhaps too far from their own interests and considerations. All I would ask is that they might perhaps consider my objections and take them on board if they feel there is sufficient reason to do so.

In brief, these are the relevant points that I would raise in criticism of this paper:

1. The authors have reduced the whole sphere of human self-communication to a particular case, namely that of linguistic self-communication or 'talking to oneself'. The idea of linguistic self-communication ('private speech') as fundamental to human self-hood, rationality, and volition is an ancient philosophical position with its own presuppositions and implications which need to be

challenged, not indulged, as Harris's book makes clear. The consequence of this ancient view, as Harris demonstrates, is a misguided conceptualisation of human thinking generally through the reductive lens of public (interpersonal) communication, i.e., as a dialogue between separate individuals, A and B, converted into a dialogue between A and A alone. We see the primacy of this communicational perspective in the authors' assertions that 'Our conscious choices... are framed in language' and that 'Free will is accomplished through the behavior of self-debate'. While there is no doubting our frequent recourse to self-debate (whatever individual differences we may display or experience), such communicational practices cannot in themselves demonstrate, let alone provide the foundation for, the notions of agency and free will as the authors take these, even when we consciously 'frame' our actions and choices 'in language', as we shall see. Conscious, purposeful, and voluntary activities across the different aspects of our lives and interactions are clearly mostly unframeable and unformulatable in linguistic terms anyway (sporting, musical, navigational, and orientational activities, etc., for which we generally don't have 'the words' and don't need any). However, such activities (and linguistic activity as well) involve the pervasive, ubiquitous, and spontaneous making of 'private signs' (see Harris) through which we monitor and guide ourselves in situ, and such signs cannot be 'there' in advance to determine our behaviour, even if the general goal may be set (by us) or agreed (with someone else). The idea that you have to formulate in words first and then act on those words is a prejudice that both encapsulates the inherent verbalism of the Western philosophical tradition and absorbs some of the 19th-early 20th century mechanistic reductionism of the then-rampant behaviourist perspectives on human behaviour.

2. In my 2008 paper, I showed the absurdity and circularity in the claim by Vygotsky and Luria that 'voluntary behaviour' (free will) could be accounted for by turning interpersonal commands into self-commands. In other words, their idea is that my own voluntary raising of my arm is actually a 'response' to my own self-command: 'raise your (my?) arm'. This absurd position had a 'developmental' rationale in the Vygotsky-Luria theory: having first 'learnt' to act in response to others' commands, subjects could then apply such commanding utterances to themselves in order to act independently. As mentioned above, interpersonal dialogue, on this view, is therefore primary and is 'converted' (or 'internalized') as inner speech.

However, if the voluntariness of my arm-raising action is a function of **me responding to my own command**, then how do we explain my issuing of the self-command itself? If my issuing of said self-command is 'determined' by some prior factor or stimulus (verbal or otherwise), then we're back where

we started since now we just have a longer chain of ‘determined’ events. But if my issuing of the self-command **is itself voluntary** then its voluntariness cannot depend on and cannot be explained by some verbal command or stimulus. In other words, how do we account for the voluntariness of the issuing/uttering/designing of utterances (whether public or private) themselves? Either we have to accept that the voluntariness of action cannot be accounted for or explained as a response to verbal communicational acts, or we set off an infinite regress. The same argument applies to the authors’ position on (self-)debate as the vehicle, mechanism, foundation, or instrument of agency and free will. Talking through a problem, weighing the pros and cons with lists, arguments, etc. (see Harris, 1996: 183–185 for a discussion of the case of Robinson Crusoe) may be a very effective form of self-communication with particular problems, but as well as helping to develop agency in particular circumstances, it also **requires agency** in the design, the ‘choice’, and the performance of the utterances (spoken or written) themselves through which a particular problem may be ‘formulated’, etc. This is obscured by the authors’ use, at crucial points, of reificatory discourse: ‘it is our “stream of consciousness” inner speech **that weighs the options before making and memorizing the decision...**’, they say. Well, no, it isn’t: it’s **me** that weighs the options and memorizes the decision.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.