

Rubinstein's conception of the "leap" to the specifically human consciousness in *Sein und Bewußtsein* : A critical evaluation*

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Rubinstein on the essence and origin of human consciousness

My focus here will be on a contribution of Rubinstein's that I consider to be very important, but, which, at the same time, has some limitations that I shall try to point out. My intention is less to criticise the position for its limitations as such, than to use them as a starting point for a further development of his ideas.

One aim of Rubinstein's book *Sein und Bewußtsein* (*Being and consciousness*, Russian edition 1957), as its subtitle indicates, is to find "the position of the psychical in the general context of phenomena in the material world" (1973, p. 1; 1976, p. 9; Mammen, 1989a, p. 155).

This refers not just to the psychical in general, but also to the question of identifying the essential characteristics of the specifically human psyche, or human consciousness.

When referring to the general context of phenomena in the world, Rubinstein wants to describe or conceptualise the phenomena and their interactions in a general way that makes it possible to define the psyche as a figure on a ground, that is, as a special manifestation of matter in general. He then

tries to define the psyche and consciousness in terms of this general ground.

What makes this definition of consciousness possible is a general principle of the dialectical determination of matter. The approach is very similar to Lenin's notion of a general principle of the dialectical determination of matter. The approach is very similar to Lenin's notion of a general principle of reflection in all matter, with psychic and conscious reflection as special cases of the general principle under the specific circumstances of human life (Mammen, 1989a, p. 156).

In Rubinstein's formulation the principle of dialectical determinism states that "outer causes act through inner conditions" (Rubinstein, 1973, p. 8; 1976, p. 15; Mammen, 1989a, p. 158).

I cannot go into the meaning of this principle in any depth here, but it is obvious that it is intended to supersede the simpler conception of mechanical determinism. In my opinion, however, Rubinstein overly stresses the role of "inner conditions" of objects or phenomena, and tends to ignore the fact that the "causes" or interactions that connect objects are also of a kind that transcend mechanical determinism. Not only are qualitatively different objects interacting in the world, but the

interactions that transcend mechanical determinism. Not only are qualitatively different objects interacting in the world, but the interactions or relations between the objects are themselves of qualitatively different orders or structures. And this, in turn, determines the occurrence of qualitatively different objects. This is in accord with Leontyev's own critique (1978, pp. 47, 55-56, 78-79, 110-111).

I stress this here, because I think it relates to some of the problems in Rubinstein's definition of consciousness, to which I will draw attention in this paper.

In *Sein und Bewußtsein* Rubinstein poses the question of the specific and essential characteristics of the human psyche or consciousness.

"Psychic phenomena arise at that moment in the reflective activity of the brain ... where the sense impressions arise, and where the stimulus reflected herein, appears as object. Exactly here we find the 'leap', the transition to psychic phenomena. And precisely therefore the gnoseological relation to the object determines the fundamental, ontological characteristics of the psychic." (1973, p. 4; 1976, p. 12; Mammen, 1989a, p. 164).

This "ontological" definition of the psychical as "gnoseological" (perhaps one could also say "epistemological") is not at the same time an explanation of the origin of the human psyche.

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Rubinstein writes:

"The reflexological conception of psychic activity determines the natural origin of psychic phenomena—the epistemological relation to objective reality determines their 'essence'." (1973, p. 4-5; 1976, p. 12; Mammen, 1989a, p. 165).

This separation of the origin and the essence of the psyche is rather strange when one considers that Rubinstein is claiming to use the methodological principles of historical and dialectical materialism (Mammen, 1989a, p. 171). It suggests that his adoption of reflexological principles is not quite whole-hearted. I shall return to this point later.

The essence of the human psyche, its "ontological" characteristic, was its gnoseological relation to objective reality, and the gnoseological relation between subject and object was defined phenomenologically as the object's appearance "as object". This seems to be a rather vague and weak definition.

In fact Rubinstein adds another more objective, defining description of the specifically human psyche, and that is its ideality, which is manifested in the relation of the psyche to language and to the ideal and material products of common human labour. If this objective characterisation of the human psyche had been given an explicit primary status in its definition compared to the phenomenological characterisation, it would have been harder—if not impossible—for Rubinstein to separate the essence and origin of the psyche as he obviously is forced to do in his attempt to define the origin of the psyche in reflexological terms.

It is also remarkable that Rubinstein consistently refers to language as what "fixates" the products of common human labour, gives them ideality as it were, but nowhere in *Sein und Bewusstsein* does he refer to language as a practical factor in the origin of the human psyche (Mammen, 1989a, p. 180-181).

However, Rubinstein's untiring efforts to define and explore this "leap" from the general context of phenomena in the world to human consciousness,

and his insistence that the leap is a real and qualitative one, although it is still to be understood as a manifestation of matter in general, fascinated me when I first encountered it, and it defined what I believed and still believe to be the fundamental project of psychology today. In my book *Den menneskelige sans* (*The human sense*, 1989a) I devoted a chapter to this project of Rubinstein's, and the present paper is a summary of some of my conclusions.

Rubinstein on the concrete vs. the abstract, and on sensory experience vs. conceptual thinking

What I shall turn to now is the more special treatment Rubinstein gives this problem of the specifically human consciousness as a problem of what characterises human conceptual thinking, that is, his understanding of the role of the concrete and the abstract and of the relation between sensory experience and concepts.

"This transition to the sphere of abstract thinking is necessary because the objective determination of phenomena is not obtained without the disentanglement of their mutual relations, when the because the objective determination of phenomena is not obtained without the disentanglement of their mutual relations, when the phenomena are given in pure form, in their lawful relations, which means abstracted from subordinate incidental circumstances, that conceal the essence of phenomena." (1973, p. 116; 1976, p. 96-97; Mammen, 1989a, p. 181).

That Rubinstein emphasises the specific role of abstractions and of concepts in human thinking is not exceptional. What, however, is exceptional is his stressing the importance of the unbroken connection between the abstract and the concrete, and between concepts and sensory experience in human thinking.

"The question of the relation between the general and the particular is a fundamental question in the theory of generalisations as well as in epistemology. That the general is abstracted in the scientific concept ought not to mean that it is detached from the particular. When the general is detached from the

particular, the general concept is at the same time detached from the objects and phenomena of reality. A separation of the concepts from the objects and phenomena of reality leads inevitably to a reduction of thinking in concepts to thinking about concepts separated from their objects. The logical conclusion of this is that the concept itself is reduced to its [abstract - JM] definition. This way of thinking also inevitably leads to a formalistic understanding of conceptual thought." (1973, p. 161; 1976, p. 136-137; Mammen, 1989a, p. 184).

Rubinstein demonstrates the validity of this statement by referring to the example of geometrical construction as a necessary step in the proof of general geometrical laws or theorems. In such a construction we do not see for instance a "general" circle with a "general" triangle inscribed in it, although the theorem claims a general relation between any circle and any inscribed triangle. On the contrary what we see is a certain circle and a certain triangle, the sizes, respective angles and positions of which are arbitrary and incidental. However, it is these incidental attributes that tie together the circle and the triangle in a strict interdependence, the general character of which is proven by the construction.

"The introduction of the special features, without which no proof is possible, is nothing other than an illustration of the thesis that in a theoretical line of thought, where we are inferring (deducing) new statements [theorems], we are thinking in concepts and operating with the objects of these concepts.... The possibility of inferring new knowledge rests upon the unbroken connection between thought and its object." (1973, p. 171-172; 1976, p. 146-147; Mammen, 1989a, p. 185-186).

I think this conclusion of Rubinstein's is very important. However, it also raises some questions. The first one is whether the geometric example with its abstract and idealised though incidental and special features adequately covers what is essential in the process of empirically founded general knowledge in which the objects are concrete, that is, have an infinite number of features while retaining self-identity over time despite changing features.

The second question is how the process of abstraction of the essential

features from the infinite numbers of incidental and special features is at all possible. Rubinstein gives no clear answer to these questions. In fact it appears that he is disregarding the fundamental step or "leap" from the concrete reality to the sum of abstracted features in theoretical thought, be they special and incidental or general and lawful. It is as if he identifies the concrete with the special and incidental because of the opposition of both to the general and lawful. In fact Rubinstein flatly states that

"theoretical thought is distinguished from empirical knowledge only by the degree of depth of analysis." (1973, p. 177; 1976, p. 151; Mammen, 1989a, p. 186).

It looks as if Rubinstein ignores important aspects of what it is to relate oneself gnoseologically to an object as a concrete object. It appears to me that Rubinstein is identifying the concrete object with a general or abstract object supplied with special and incidental but still abstracted features. However, such an identification is unjustified, as I shall try to show, and, moreover, it renders one theoretically insensitive to what I consider to be the kernel of the "leap" to specifically human thinking and consciousness.

When identifying the concrete with the incidental and particular, Rubinstein also identifies the concrete with what is given in the rich sensory experience of objects. ~~And as there is, according to Rubinstein, continuity between empirical and theoretical rich sensory experience of objects. And as there is, according to Rubinstein, continuity between empirical and theoretical knowledge and ought to be an unbroken connection between the general and the particular, he arrives necessarily at the following conclusion:~~

"In spite of the widespread conception that sensory knowledge is knowledge of the singular and not of the general, the real facts are as follows: a) The singular is not completely determined by direct sensory experience, b) Sensory experience must necessarily possess a certain degree of generality, as the animal would not be able to adapt to its changing conditions of life, if the sensory experience were not generalised." (1973, p. 115; 1976, p. 95-96; Mammen, 1989a, p. 195).

I think Rubinstein is right in this. But the problem is how we can, on the one hand, maintain this continuity and relativity between the particular and the general, between the incidental and the general, a continuity that exists as well for animals, between the particular and the general, between the incidental and the general, a continuity that exists as well for animals, and, on the other hand, maintain that there is a radical "leap" to specifically human thinking. In some way, we must maintain both these apparent opposites to explain both the origin and the essence of human thought. We must understand human thought and consciousness as a radical new quality in the world, as a "leap", and at the same time understand how this leap is possible as a process.

In order to obtain this dialectical understanding I think it is insufficient to work with just two opposites: the general, abstract and necessary on the one hand, and the particular, singular, concrete, sensory and incidental on the other. I think that the last set of categories should be divided into a set that contains the particular, sensory and incidental, and another that contains the concrete and singular.

My point is that Rubinstein's distinction between the general, abstract and necessary on one side and the particular, sensory and incidental on the other is one of degree. These opposites you will find already in animal cognition, as Rubinstein rightly notes.

But the distinction between the general, abstract and necessary on the one side and the concrete and singular on the other is not one of degree but of discontinuity or "leap". And my claim is that what is unique to human beings in the first instance is not the transition from the particular, sensory and incidental to the general, abstract and necessary; rather, it is the transition to the concrete and singular, and this cannot be identified with any of the other categories.

While this transition constitutes a "leap", it is easier to understand how such a leap is accomplished, than it is to

understand the postulated crawling up the ladder from the incidental to the general. More about this in the next section.

My point of view, alluding to Lucien Sève, could be termed a "concrete human psychology". In his article "For a distinctly concrete Marxism", Sève argues against the identification of "e.g. a concrete individual [as merely] a 'person in general' who differs from others in certain 'particular feature' [Besonderheiten]" (Sève, 1984, p. 82).

In Figure 1 on page 32 I attempt to sketch some of the identities and differences between Rubinstein's theory and that of "concrete human psychology".

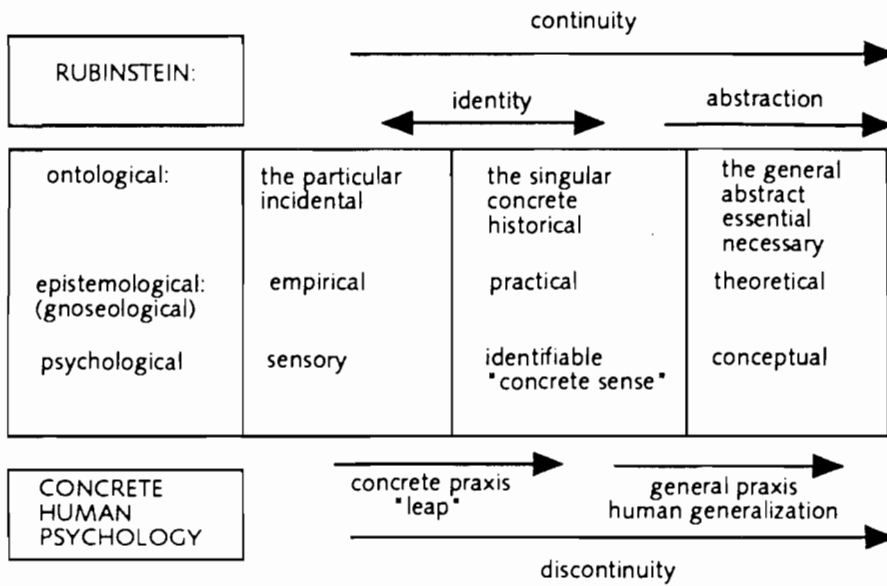
The specifically human "concrete sense"

After this discussion of the categorial discontinuities of human consciousness let us have a look at its genesis, i.e. the developmental transitions through the categories.

Phylogenetically one can imagine how our anthropoid ancestors developed from a situation of using ad hoc tools, such as the termite fishing sticks of today's chimpanzees, to a situation of keeping and "owning" their tools over time. The relation of "ownership", individual or collective, is to singular objects in the environment, that is, "individuals" in philosophical terminology. The objects are recognised and practically identified with the assistance of their sensory appearance, but the appearance is not what is to be identified, namely, the history of the object, which is the history of the singular object and not of its appearance.

On the one hand, this identification and attachment to singular objects is the beginning of making and knowing an environment of cultural objects. On the other hand, it is also the entrance to knowledge through work. In work one does not just produce ad hoc, as do the anthropoids. Instead, one follows the fate of the object in the process of production, noticing and learning from the opposition between its identity over time and its changing sensory ap-

Figure 1



pearance. This is the "trigger", I think, to the specifically human abstractions and generalisations, which can never be reached by an animal incapable of this "solidarity" with the object.

This solidarity or lasting attachment between subject and object independent of sensory or universal features is, I think, a new objective connection in nature, a new quality of interaction independent of sensory or universal features is, I think, a new objective connection in nature, a new quality of interaction in matter. It has a specific inner condition in man, a specifically human "concrete sense" or "sense of the concrete". But it cannot be reduced to this inner condition. I have discussed this in more detail elsewhere (Mammen 1989b; 1993).

Ontogenetically, one can imagine the infant at a certain point in its development identifying its mother as being the same despite sensory variances and "invariances". This new opposition implies both contradiction and development in the child. The child develops a general concept of object-permanence and learns from this to see not just the immediate "functionalities" of the objects in the environment, but also their history of production and

ownership. The child learns to pay "respect" as it were to what belongs to other people and to himself despite outward appearances. Language is of course an important mediator of this acquisition of cultural meaning. This point of view also integrates the specifically human consciousness with the specificity of human feelings, that is, our affections or feelings of solidarity towards other human beings and towards our cultural products. I would even claim that these feelings are of importance as well to the making of scientific progress. But I cannot go into details with this here.

Conclusion

When Rubinstein speaks of human thinking as moving from the concrete, sensory given to the abstract and back to the concrete on a higher level, I reply that the specifically human thinking moves from the sensory abstractions to the individual or singular concrete, from there to the essential abstractions, and finally to the concrete on a higher level. Moreover, the first step to the individual concrete is the key to human consciousness, both to the concrete on a higher level. Moreover, the first step to the individual concrete is the key to human

consciousness, both to its origin or genesis and to its essence (Mammen, 1989a, p. 198).

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