

Commentary 10 on
Karl Jaspers Forum, Target Article 17, 4 May 1999

KNOWING WITHOUT METAPHYSICS:
ASPECTS OF THE RADICAL CONSTRUCTIVIST POSITION
by Ernst von Glasersfeld

LOGIC AND ONTOLOGY OF SPITONITISM

by Paul Jones

10 August 1999

Abstract

The issues of logic and consistency in TA 17 are concerned. The presence of a 'hidden' ontology is indicated, so that the text style is far from what might be expected within the constructivist approach.

As Prof. von Glasersfeld indicated in a number of places in the article commented, as well as in his responses to other Comments, Radical Constructivism does not have to do with any "metaphysics" – as far as I can derive from the context, this term is used to refer to the level of philosophy treating the things as they are (the "ontological reality"); however, some epistemological assertions are being made, and a definite ethical position is taken, indicating the preferable ways of thinking and acting. Since no philosophy can exist without any one of these three levels, the suppression of ontology must result in an *implicit* ontology, which will most probably be an eclectic mixture of materialistic and idealistic ideas. However, this issue will not be considered in my commentary in any considerable detail; here, I would like to concentrate on the logical side of the article.

The principal idea of Radical Constructivism might be expressed in one phrase: "I don't care." For a Radical Constructivist, it does not matter, whether there is anything at all, what is right or wrong, what will be the far consequences of one's actions, and how these actions are to influence the other people. I just do something, according to my own mental "constructions", and wait for possible experiences no matter which – then I say that I am a Radical Constructivist, and if I don't like my experiences, I can always re-interpret them in an arbitrary way to console myself. This devil-may-care attitude could be exactly characterized by the soviet Russian word 'наплевательство' – in English it might sound like 'spitonitism', using the calc of the Russian for 'I spit on it!' ('Наплевать!'). I find this name more appropriate for the constructivist approach, though "Radical Constructivism" may sound better...

Still, one can hardly ever object that such a lifestyle may have certain convenience in it, relieving a person from much trouble. As long as it remains individual choice, without pretending to become anything institutionalized, this is a matter of personal preference, whether to care for anything (or anybody) or not. In this case, there can be no argument or persuasion, nothing to discuss – however, the society may develop a quite definite attitude to spitonitism – or Radical Constructivism if you please – especially noting that quite often a spitonitist happens to spit on the others too, not only on him/herself.

Personally, I feel that the word "knowing" is a little bit confusing in the title of the article: there might better stand something more specific, meaning the refusal to know as opposed to knowing. Also, any reference to epistemology is excessive, and the only relevant content would be mere description of the typical behavior of a Radical Constructivist in certain situations, the constructivist schemes of activity. No justification is needed: I act that way just because I choose so – this is the only logic a Radical Constructivist may apply.

No doubt, a Radical Constructivist has right to write anything he/she likes, and one cannot demand

any logic, or consistency, from a person who does not care. Therefore, no portion of my comment is addressed to Prof. von Glasersfeld, since I have no real reasons for argument with him. I aim at those who might care for some consistency, and maybe a little ontology. I would like merely take a few sentences out of the Prof. von Glasersfeld's article, and show my personal view of the issues concerned – as I perceive them.

{7}† “Kant, then, produced its final formulation in his Critique of Pure Reason which all subsequent philosophers have unsuccessfully struggled to undo.”

In fact, one can never undo anything. One can just do something different. There is no way back in human history, and in the history of philosophy in particular. Yes, Kant has done a good deal of work, which will remain part of spiritual culture for centuries, influencing the development of human consciousness. The others came, and discussed Kant's writings, and found answers to some questions, leaving the rest for the future generations. There is no need to absolutize Kant – and thus kill the live content of his works.

{9} “in order to know something, one had to know how and out of what it was made.”

This is wrong. Quite often it is enough to know how the thing can (or should) be used. For instance, a person can drive a car without caring too much about how it all works (there are service workers for that); the same with computers: few people know well how it all works, but this does not hinder their using computers for practical purposes on a wide scale. A talented music performer may be unaware of the rules of counterpoint, chord succession or musical notation – still, he/she can play, and even teach the others. There is a kind of implicit knowledge that merely had not yet chance to come to awareness, or was not allowed to; this fact is the cornerstone of psychoanalysis. The major part of this “hidden” knowledge has been acquired through assimilating the culturally preferred forms of activity, and the practical orientation is primary in any knowledge. I suspect that one cannot be said to know something if there is no way to apply it in one's activity. See Glasersfeld's asserting nearly the same in {15}.

{9} “Hence, God alone can know the real world, because it was He who created it; the human knower, analogously, could know only what humans have constructed.”

This sentence provides one more illustration of how wrong conclusions can be drawn from a false assumption. In most cases, people do *not* know how they do anything – and it takes a lot of reflection to uncover the schemes of human activity. It is much easier to look at what the others have made, and analyze it, and learn how and out of what it was made. Indeed, this is the only possible way of self-understanding too. Consequently, there is no reason to admit the impossibility of knowing something in the world, despite that it was not made by any human.

By the way, reading the Bible stories, one cannot get rid of the feeling that God did not know well what he was doing creating the world, and people could easily fool him all the time, and make him angry – that is, aware of his lapses. The attempts to overcome this difficulty gave birth to a wealth of theological literature, which, naturally, could not entirely remove the question.

Looking at the history of science, one can easily see that it required a lot of time and effort to understand what some scientists of the past have really “constructed”; still, there can always appear new studies, revealing new aspects of what has been long since “firmly established”. The discussions around quantum mechanics and relativism could be one example; another one is provided by the vivid discussion on Piaget at this Forum and in some other discussion groups.

{13} “What differentiates Radical Constructivism from the tradition, is the proposal unequivocally to give up the notion that knowledge ought to be a veridical ‘representation’ of a world as it ‘exists’ prior to being experienced (that is, ontological reality).”

This is a self-contradiction. Radical Constructivist cannot “give up” any notion, since, in doing so, he would tacitly attribute ontological status to his/her theory (using Glasersfeld's wording {12}). What

† Notation: { } paragraphs of the source text.

could only be said is that it is suggested to act disregarding anything but one's own arbitrary "constructions" – there is no world around, and nothing can disturb an abstracted thinker from their splendid meditation... This is certainly so, if the thinker has enough income.

{15} "this means that 'to know' is not to possess 'true representations' of reality, but rather to possess ways and means of acting and thinking that allow one to attain the goals one happens to have chosen."

This is exactly what is meant under the words "true representation of reality". Note that the very word "re-presentation" assumes a difference from what was "presented" – the difference introduced by associating the "sensory image" with the schemes of activity available, which could be called the 'elementary conceptions' in this case [P. B. Ivanov, *Leonardo*, 27, no. 5, pp. 417-421 (1994)]

{16} "one demands of knowledge that it prove itself by a functional fit"

Such a demand (like any demand at all) would mean a certain ontology implicitly introduced. If there is something obligatory for different people, it *must* exist in a way independent of the people's will, and hence be objective. This better suits a capricious woman: "I do not give any prescriptions, but I demand that you do as I tell you..."

{19} "All it means is that in some part of our present experiential field there is the kind of raw material..."

Why should a Radical Constructivist bother about such trifle things as consistency in applying concepts to experiences? It would be enough to simply say: "I call that a book, because I feel like that." It would be strange for a person who wants to know only what he/she can construct to care for any "experiential fields" that could be suspected of having some relation to the world out there... The objection that every element of the "experiential field" has been constructed by the "cognizing system" {22}, is not convincing enough, since there is still the question of the existence of the "cognizing system" itself, its difference from the "experiential field", and the existence of that difference.

{20} "First, 'concepts', in my view, are not like picture postcards against which one matches experiential material rather, they are pathways of action or operation and they can either be completed with the experiential material at hand, or they cannot, and the rigor with which that completion is required and carried out always depends on the particular setting in which the activity takes place."

This would become a sound materialistic sentence if one removed the ambiguous word "experiential" from it. Concepts are schemes of activity, though they may be folded schemes, and it is not always evident to which activity they refer.

{21} "the totality of basic sensory elements or distinctions our system is able to generate."

And what determines its ability to generate anything? Does it much differ from the "tacit attributing ontological status to that theory", blamed by Prof. von Glasersfeld in those who tried to reduce consciousness to biology {12}? If it is the system itself that decides what it can do, its motion becomes random, which is not like what I would like to consider as human; if not, there has to be something beyond the system, which brings us to ontology.

{22} "Concepts, therefore, have no iconic or representational connection with anything that might 'exist' outside the cognizing system"

First, "iconic" is not identical to "representational" (see above). Second, the very form of the sentence is quite 'ontological': it says that certain things take place. It is not in the constructivist line to assert anything.

{22} "From the distinguisher's point of view, what is actually distinguished depends not on what might be there before the activity of distinguishing is carried out, but on what the organism is able to distinguish and chooses to distinguish in the given experiential context."

This contradicts the earlier stress on knowing "how and out of what" {9}. There are both "out of what" (what to distinguish) and "how" (the culturally formed ways of distinction) – one could also consider the 'product' of distinction as a (dialectical) synthesis of 'material' and 'form' (to translate it

into the traditional philosophical language).

{23} “If one adopts a constructivist orientation, one is obliged to go beyond the mere proclamation that the world we experience is a world we construct.”

Who or what can oblige a constructivist, save his or her own whim? Just construct it a different way if you feel any inconvenience. How can one speak about the distinction of the “two worlds” at all?

{23} “if one claims to be a radical constructivist, one must also show that this experiential world can be built up without reference to a supposedly ‘existing’ world.”

If one says that he/she doesn’t care for anything but his/her “constructions” (which is the definition of Radical Constructivism), there is no need to argue. If “experiential” world is not a construction, why consider it? The very attempt to say anything about something gives it an ontological status, while an orthodox constructivist would never say: “This is so.” --- they would rather say: “I act this way.” (which, however, doesn’t help much in avoiding ontological assumptions)

{24} “Before any one of us comes to ask an epistemological question, he or she has lived for quite some time and gained a good deal of know-how in categorizing, avoiding, and also provoking experiential situations.”

The word “experiential” can be omitted, for more clarity. From this phrase on, the style is quite ontological, having nothing constructivist about it.

{24} “We gain much of this practical knowledge early in life, and it reflects ‘reality’ to us, because it deals with what our lives consist of. In today’s social climate it happens rarely before puberty – if at all - that we reflect upon our praxis.”

Yes, syncretic knowledge coming from one’s everyday life is the only representation of reality in the person on the early stages of the development of the person’s spirituality. It is through reflection of one’s place in the culture that spiritual maturity comes, if at all. I would discriminate ‘experience’ (syncretic level) from ‘praxis’ (synthetic level); there is an intermediate analytical level that links experience to praxis, and this analytical activity includes all kinds of ideas, from mythology and religion to arts, science and philosophy, and eventually to an integral idea of the world, which regulates one’s practical activity all the time and in every instance.

{26} “Descriptions follow, as the child makes further distinctions...”

This contradicts the above statement that the ability of posing deep questions has to gradually form. Originally, the child can make no distinctions, and it takes much adult’s time to teach the child to distinguish, and some people do not learn it quite well in all their life. It is not us who make distinctions, it is praxis, and culture as its objectification.

{27} “This first distinction...”

This smells of ‘god’. Assuming any primordial acts, one builds ontology of a certain kind.

{27} “For the point of view I have adopted, the most important thing about that distinction is not what is being distinguished, but that the artist makes the distinction within the sheet, the canvas, or whatever he happens to be drawing on.”

Still, one has to have something to draw on, to be able to distinguish anything. Also, one has to learn to recognize the distinctions made, which is the heart of any creativity, and which is not easily acquired. For example, adults often get moved by the funny words produced by little children, while the children themselves do not find anything funny about it. It is through communication with adults that children learn to recognize “illegal” forms – and construct them intentionally, for fun.

{27} “This is the feature traditional epistemology has tended to obscure: the distinction between the self and its environment is made, and can only be made, within an observer’s field of experience and does not concern the distinction between the observing subject and an ‘objective’ world to be observed or known.”

Traditional materialistic philosophy had never denied that any knowledge of the world can come to a

person only through his/her senses, and hence must be mediated by a kind of activity. However, this does not exclude the possibility of reflecting the objective world in subjective forms, especially regarding the position of dialectical materialism that the very subjective forms are objective on a higher (social) level. For comparison, it is the own atoms of the flying arrow that get attracted by the Earth's gravity, but it would be strange to deny the interaction between the arrow and the Earth on this reason, returning to the primitive conception of a 'self-propelling' arrow. Eventually, the world is unique, and it cannot interact with anything but itself, so that *any* interaction at all is nothing but self-action. The highest form of this self-action is called consciousness.

{27} "In other words, the self we come to know and the world we come to know are both assembled out of elements of our very own experience."

This logical error is commonly known as subject substitution, violation the principle of identity. If I perceive both the world and myself using the same senses and elementary conceptions, it only implies that our *perception* of the world and ourselves is made of the same elements, but not that the world and the self are made of them. Consciousness is based on representing one thing with another, made of something entirely different (e.g. words). Compare representing words with pictograms, sentences or long paragraphs with formulas and drawings, oral speech with writing etc.

{30} "The early stages of this progression are part and parcel of the development that Piaget (1967b: 9) called a Copernican Revolution at the end of which, 'when language and thought begin, (the child) is for all practical purposes but one element or entity among others in a universe that he has gradually constructed himself, and which hereafter he will experience as external to himself.' "

Rather, this could be called anti-Copernican counter-revolution: instead of recognition of the person's belonging to a higher-level formation, one is brought back to an anthropocentric view of the world. As L. Vygotsky has demonstrated, this theory by Piaget has nothing to do with real child's development [*Thought and Language*, 1934]. Vygotsky's observations have been largely tested and confirmed by other researchers in the USSR [e.g. V. V. Davydov *The Problems of Developing Education*, Moscow, 1984]

{32} "The more generally they are applicable, the less of them we need."

Applicable to what? To other constructions? If all we can do is a construct, there is no need to apply. If we speak of any application, it implies something beyond us – even if that something has been earlier made by us, it has to become detached from us (objectified). There is no immediate self-action, neither in physical world nor in consciousness.

{33} "Though one's concepts, one's ways of operating, and one's knowledge cannot be constructed by any other subject than oneself, it is their viability, their adequate functioning in one's physical and social environment, that furnishes the key to the solidification of the individual's experiential reality"

This is a direct indication to the existence of the "physical and social environment" that serves to test the viability of one's "constructions". Just one step from dialectical materialism.

{34} "language arises and becomes a relatively stable system through the continual interaction of the individuals that use it, so a great many of the conceptual schemes that individuals construct are reinforced through their application in social interaction."

The same as above: there are other individuals, whose existence makes individual "schemes" meaningful.

{36} "If a prediction, made on the basis of imputing to another person a scheme of acting or thinking that one has found to be viable for oneself, turns out to be correct, then that scheme and the conceptual structures it involves achieve a level of experiential reality that cannot be reached without the social context."

To put it plain: if everybody does what I do, I conclude that I do right. In other words: I am not interested in being true, but rather in being a part of the crowd. This is exactly what mass propaganda aims at.

{36} “this kind of ‘corroboration’ produces the only objectivity that is possible in the Radical Constructivist view.”

Indeed, if there is no physical and social action, all what is left is comparing one fantasy to another. This is the common fault of academic thinkers: they do not do anything to change the world, and then they are tempted to generalize their passive attitude to the rest of the society.

{40} “teachers must try to infer, from what they can observe, what the students’ concepts are and how they operate with them. Only on the basis of some such hypothesis can teachers devise ways and means to orient, direct, or modify the students’ mental operating.”

In reality, one can change something without clear knowledge of how it operates and what is in there. This makes it possible that wrong pedagogical theories lead to educational progress; on the other side, it is possible for performance-oriented teaching to cripple the souls of the students. Still, if we want to achieve certain objectives in education, we cannot avoid involving a theory, which must be the theory of the student’s formation, rather than arbitrary constructs of the educator. In practice, teachers can never be constructivists, if they have just a little care for the child.

{42} “Because the child’s way of thinking is never directly accessible, the investigators’ model can never be compared to it”

This position of epistemological idealism is based on the ontological assumption that the ways people think have nothing to do with the ways they act. Merely assuming that the person’s behavior objectifies his/her mental processes makes everything in the subject observable and tractable in the normal way of other sciences. Additionally assuming that social processes determine individual development, one can go beyond mere phenomenology (‘kinematics’), to a ‘dynamic’ description, connecting the changes in the system’s motion with the forces applied.

{43} “If the constructivist movement has done anything at all, it has dismantled the image of language as a means of transferring thoughts, meanings, knowledge, or ‘information’ from one speaker to another.”

Everybody knows that language is not the only means of communication, and there may be situations when language can only hinder communication. Also, it has been known since antiquity that words can have different meanings in different communication contexts. What constructivism has really done is that it, first, deprived people of any means of communication other than language and, second, concluded from the fallibility of language to the impossibility of any communication at all (which was quite logical this time, since no other ways of communication were not allowed). In a wider view, with any communication being a part of a joint activity, language can well serve for communicating anything from one person to another, since the commonality of conceptual background is ensured by the common activity. Following the constructivist logic, one could deny the possibility of radio and TV on the reason that a radio or TV set can be tuned to any frequency, and there is little chance that this frequency will coincide with that of the transmitter...

{44} “Language does not transport pieces of one person’s reality into another’s – it merely prods and prompts the other to build up conceptual structures which, to this other, seem compatible with the words and actions the speaker or writer has used.”

This sentence assumes that different people live in different realities (quite ontological assumption, isn’t it?). However, people live in the same world, and share the same reality, so that language does not have to transport anything from one isolated world to another – rather, communication is a social process involving a number of people engaged in a common activity. Definitely, language does not merely produce an image of one person in another – it stimulates collaboration [see my article “Art as Creative Communication”; available online at <http://unism.narod.ru/arc/1998ac/ace.htm>]

{45} “Though there is no way to get around the uncertainty inherent in all conjectures about another’s mental states and processes, it would be foolish to say that this uncertainty makes the conjectured models useless.”

The models prove to be useful as long as they reflect objective reality, on certain levels. And the very

uncertainty in one's knowledge is a reflection of one's economic and social position, within the current cultural environment.

{45} "As long as the models we construct help us to solve the problems that concern us, their ontological status ought not to worry us."

If we don't care for any ontology, why should we be worried by any problems? They are mere "constructions", and all one ought to do is to change one's mind, and be glad...

{54} "Finally, I would like to add that the constructivist orientation, as other proponents have claimed, does lead to greater tolerance in social interactions. This tolerance springs from the realization that neither problems nor solutions are ontological entities, but arise out of particular ways of constructing. Hence, no solution to an experiential problem can be 'right' in an ontological sense. The world in which the problem arises depends on a way of seeing, a way of experiencing; and where there is one solution there are always others – but this does not entail that one like them all equally well."

This paragraph is a concentrated expression of the social position of Radical Constructivism. It has been designed to prevent people from fighting for their rights in an evil society; instead, they are consoled with the tale about an imaginary world one can construct and live in, having full control over what is good or bad in it. That is what they intend to say:

"You are hungry and homeless not because you live in the society that does not give you a decent living, but because you have imagined your hunger and homelessness. You get robbed not because the robber is bad, but only because you are bad, and you might change yourself to become as respectable as the robber. But there is no use fighting; do not care for anything, just sleep, dream and be quiet."

In other words, the people are persuaded to cease being conscious and degrade to the state of the herd cattle. Maybe somebody will like it. Personally, I don't.

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