

Abstract of

Timid constructivism and mechanisms of defense in context of Indo-European critical philosophy

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To believe that our knowledge of ourselves and our situation is objective is mentally comfortable. To contemplate the possibility that it is a construction is daring. Nevertheless, most contemporary constructivists are timid. Although they accept the notion that existence and significance of attributes of the world are the result of a construction, they, including adherents of second-order cybernetics, take being and meaning of a Self or an Observer for granted. This is although even modern psychologists such as Freud and Piaget and sociologists such as Vico, Marx, Holzner Berger and Luckman concerned themselves with the interaction between the construction of the World and of the Self. The problem and the temptation to seek its avoidance in asymmetric dualism have been recognized since the early formulations in the Vedas of Indo-European critical philosophy. The interplay between the continuing construction and reconstruction of the World(s) and the Self (Selves) is in current psychology perhaps best described in accounts of mechanisms of defense and coping.

Text

Sociology on the move

“Determinism is dead in the social sciences.” So the first immediate pronunciamiento in the advertisement for the next world marketplace for sociologists that is to take place in the summer of next year. An instantly emerged memory of a title of a paper perhaps sixty years old “The determinants of the belief that the will is free” filled me with glee. Determined by the expectation that there are gems to follow I plowed through the hundreds of empty phrases of the “come and display yourself” prospectus for “Sociology on the move”.

The almost pornographic exhibition of not understood terms by the advertisers confirmed what I often experience from some of my colleagues: terms, including such as cybernetics, phenomenology, postmodern or constructivism, are balls to be tossed around in the for me uninteresting occupational or ideological games they play.

Constructivism at a standstill

In the following I wish to call attention not to “Constructivism on the move”, but to the standstill of timid constructivism as it is understood by most other that some members of esoteric sects. The understanding of constructivism by the exoteric public is influenced by

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the syndrome of opinions that the protagonists of the notion display for several decades in varying combinations. In it are rejections of what they call conventional, standard or positivist science, and sympathies to voluntarism, autopoiesis, cybernetics, second order cybernetics, postmodernism, hidden creationism or flirting with the anthropic principle, the rejection of Wertfreiheit and its replacement by an obligation of engagement by each and every scientist or scholar and the categorical imperative of their taking a correct value stand.

Epistemological timidity

The initial fundamental indo-European ontological presupposition is that all is non-dual. Violation of non-duality in critical epistemology would require that epistemic considerations of Self and of Situation are both noetic and noematic. I do not wish to add here to the reviews by many others and of mine elsewhere of the perennial constructivism that occur formulated in minor varieties in Indo-European philosophy from the time of the Vedas till today. On the whole it is a constructivism that is (to use a phenomenological term) noematic, that is epistemologically outer oriented. While Descartes takes the Ego in the Cogito as at least problematic, even Spinozian Natura Sive Eidolon is again outer oriented, and in general, so is Kant. The Eye of God which spies on us in many Catholic churches from the ceiling is in timid constructivisms ever present as a mythical Observer. From where she/he/it/multiune appears we are mostly not told².

The construction of the Self

A critical epistemology (or constructivism) would concern itself significantly with the construction of the Self. It is not within the limits of this rumination to review or to evaluate the many attempts at formulation of the emergence of the Self in relation to its Situation. Only some systematic efforts are now mentioned. Very frequent is the idea of the complementarity of subject and space-time. Another domain of interest is the complementarity, correspondence or reduction of mentality and action to brain states, their deformities and injuries. Closely related is the literature on developmental stages and neural maturation. Much of cultural anthropology and personality psychology has as a key topic the emergence and transformation of the Self depending on its Situation. Among the original formulations of this relationship is of course Sigmund Freud, but also more recent thinkers such as Erikson, Parsons and Bales, Garfinkel (his initial ideas about ethnomethodology), and the attempt by Powers to reverse the normally formulated relation between perception and action by cyberneticians.

Psychology of mechanisms of adjustment and defense

There is among others an area of psychology that could be seen as, without necessarily explicitly declaring so, concerning itself with the construction of a Self. It describes coping mechanisms defined as the skills used to reduce stress (often characterized as consciously

² In social sciences and especially in the so-called "second/order cybernetics" the key significance of an "observer" is implicitly and often explicitly based on an understanding of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory, specifically the so called "collapse of the wave function" and the Hamiltonian operator. There are interpretations (e.g. Sunny Y. Auyang's) according to which the presence of an observer (and especially of consciousness) for the transition from micro (quantum) to macro is not needed.

used skills) and defense mechanisms (regarded as their unconscious counterpart). There is a continuous discussion whether any or all of the mechanisms are innate or learned.

The fundamental mechanism, discussed even before Sigmund Freud, is repression. Currently, one can encounter the descriptions and analyses of some 40 defense mechanisms. Among them are acting out, affiliation, aim inhibition, altruism, avoidance, compensation, delusional projection, denial, devaluation, displacement, dissociation, distortion, fantasy, humor, idealization, identification, intellectualization, introjection, isolation, passive aggression, projection, projective identification, rationalization, reaction formation, repression, somatization, splitting, sublimation, suppression, undoing.

All these, although not necessarily discussed as such, describe instances of maintenance or modifications of a Self in relation to its situation. For those who are not familiar with the voluminous literature, one could suggest Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, Anna Freud, Paul Wachtel and Phebe Cramer.

Systems of orientation

A specification of the strictly complementary processes and, categories and terms which I propose as necessary and perhaps sufficient for the construction of the Self and of the World I have recently republished as Chapter 13 in my *Experience and Action*.

It is harder to read and study this detailed proposal (especially since much of it is presented in tabular form) than to hear and to repeat the general declarations of the credo that the essence of the World and of the Self are not there laid out for us to discover and to know, but that their 'knowledge' is constructed. An informed and critical examination at least by proclaimed constructivists would be a step beyond sectarianism.

Principle of in-authenticity

Generally, the relation between the Self and its Situation (the World) I postulate to be governed by a principle of maximum possible reduction of any discrepancy between the definition of Self and the perceived state of Self in the World. There are two complementary ways to reduce a discrepancy: to change the Situation to correspond to the definition of the Self or to change the definition of the Self to correspond to the Situation.

Postmodern constructivism

A symmetrical or complementary constructivism seems to me to be possible to develop naturally within a postmodern systems of orientation that already incorporates the ideas of noetic-noematic complementarity and covariance of meaning under transformations of Self and/or of Situation. I have described the essential features of a sober postmodern systems theory.³

My construction of a Self

Any construction of a Self must accept the doctrine of the noetic inaccessibility of the self, as articulated in the ancient Hindu doctrine of anatta (no unique, definite and knowable Self), that Buddha allegedly taught and the various schools of his followers made famous. One may attempt to develop an epistemology of the self, based on procedures and categories such as I have alluded to in the three sections above.

³ Republished recently as Chapter 7 in my *Experience and Action*.

I have described elsewhere⁴ my construction (or topo- and choro-graphy) of the subject, ghost, image or eidolon called the Self. A Self is heterogeneous and anisotropic. Its boundaries are susceptible to deformation, to which it often responds by what appears as hyper-elastic, -plastic and -rupture properties. It may only partially restore its original shape but on the other hand it may continue deforming even after the original load has been removed. These types of responses receive various interpretations in the behavioral sciences, among which may be mentioned the ideas of internalization of external forces (delayed learning) and neuroses. The boundary of the Self has also extreme fragile proclivities, including the possibilities of fragmentation. It is dynamic and historical (i.e. subject to hysteresis), heterarchic, itinerant, modal and metabolic (in that it devours various images and types of the future and having digested them, ejects them as various narratives of the past). We may think of a Self as a swath of being (or meaning) in indefiniteness.

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4 Most comprehensively and recently in my *Experience and Action*.