A Mess of the Grounding Role of Metaphysics

Adriana Schetz

University of Szczecin, Poland
adriana.schetz/at/gmail.com

> **Upshot** • In his target article, Werner focuses his efforts on finding a metaphysical paradigm in which it would be suitable to embed – as he puts it – some movements in contemporary philosophy and cognitive science, and especially radical constructivism and the embodied cognition approach. In my commentary, I shall briefly discuss the question of metaphysical grounding or embedding of radical constructivism, and make an attempt to show that the author has failed to explain what this grounding is supposed to be, and that radical constructivism has to remain characteristically an anti-metaphysical doctrine. Of course, I do appreciate the ingenious efforts to find the metaphysical grounding of radical constructivism, as far as the question of cognitive access to and the knowability of reality is concerned, but I would like to undermine the key tenet of the article that radical constructivism is in the pressing need of a metaphysics of some sort.

« 1 » Radical constructivism (RC), as developed by Ernst von Glasersfeld, is described by Konrad Werner as the view according to which we shall distinguish experienced reality from ontological reality. Werner takes experienced reality to be "the perceived (cognized) world," and ontological reality to be "reality as it is in itself." In contrast to the former, the latter is supposed to be "just a postulate or theoretical fiction, since we cannot have any knowledge of it" (§17). According to von Glasersfeld, the aim of cognition is not to produce true representations of reality but rather biological adaptation consisting of increasing skills of action in a changing environment. In addition, these skills are not the results of behavioural tuning to environmental requirements or constraints; they are simply the outcome of accumulation of contingent and accidental, yet successful, actions (Glasersfeld 1984a: 4). Werner proposes to consider knowledge and experienced reality as "constructs that do not adequately represent ontological reality" (§17). This does not mean, as Werner – following von Glasersfeld – emphasizes, that RC is committed to denying the existence of an ontic world; merely that it is bound to be sceptical about its knowability. Warner concludes that this scepticism about obtaining knowledge of reality, endorsed by RC, leads to severing the link between knowledge and metaphysics, since the former is solely the construction of the human mind, while the latter aspires to provide has the aspiration of providing the description of ontic reality. To sum up, according to Werner, RC is anti-metaphysical in its approach to the status and practice of knowledge.

« 2 » These considerations are seen as conveying something essential about the metaphysics of perception, as Werner puts it. For him, "when the metaphysics of perception and of the perceived world is taken into account, the distinction between experienced reality and ontological reality itself turns out to be metaphysical" (§21). Werner stresses that the difference between concepts of these two kinds of reality depends on "difference between two kinds of realms" (ibid). He expresses his view on this matter as follows: "the separation thesis: experienced reality has nothing in common with ontological reality" (ibid). He subsequently admits that thinkers who accept the separation thesis have to deploy some concept of the relationship between experienced reality and ontological reality, and, as Werner emphasizes, "this idea belongs to metaphysics" (§22). For this reason, Werner claims that RC needs metaphysical grounding, to be found in the so-called PL-metaphysics, in the metaphysics of Plato and G. W. Leibniz.

« 3 » Two statements are particularly striking in the context of Werner's discussions:

- Knowledge and experienced reality are merely constructs that do not *adequately* represent ontological reality;
- From the fact that the concept of the relationship between experienced reality and ontological reality belongs to metaphysics, it *follows* that if one makes use of this concept, one *needs metaphysics*.

« 4 » The first statement is worrying to the extent of involving the category of adequate representation. Indeed, Werner is justified in claiming that RC takes knowledge and experienced reality as constructs of mind, social practice, effects of biological adaptation, etc. However, he needlessly charges radical constructivists with assuming that cognition or knowledge does not adequately represent reality. After all, he himself quotes von Glasersfeld as denying that the aim of cognition is to produce representations, and especially that one is not allowed to talk here about any criteria of adequacy. And this means that Werner is not entitled to object that radical constructivists do not have in their purview the possibility of recognizing the relationship between cognition or knowledge and reality. One should bear in mind that for RC, "the function of cognition is adaptative in biological sense […] and allows one to attain the goals one happens to have chosen" (§17; Glasersfeld 1984a: 4). It is rather odd that Werner ignores that, since he himself invokes the first part of this quote. In "An Introduction to Radical Constructivism," von Glasersfeld explicitly states:

> ❝Whereas in the traditional view of epistemology, as well as of cognitive psychology, that relation is always seen as a more or less picture-like (iconic) correspondence or match, radical constructivism sees it as an adaptation in the functional sense. […] From the radical constructivist point of view, all of us – scientists, philosophers, laymen, school children, animals, indeed any kind of living organism – face our environment as the burglar faces a lock that he has to unlock in order to get at the loot. This is the sense in which the word 'fit' applies to Darwin's and neo-Darwinist theories of evolution.❞ (Glasersfeld 1984a: 3)

It seems to me that the properly identified problem with RC does not consist of the absence of adequacy between cognition or knowledge and reality, but rather of its virtual presence under a different name, due to being smuggled in through the back door, as it were. So what does it mean after all that as cognizing subjects we tend to fit to our environment, and to how this environment is conceived?

« 5 » As far as the second statement is concerned, the matter appears to be more serious and closely connected with the foregoing question. Is it really the case that everyone who invokes, explicitly or implicitly, notions related to the broadly understood

conceptual scheme of metaphysics, presupposes a determinate metaphysics or should attempt to find metaphysical grounding for one's claims? I believe that there is no such transition. Werner concludes his convoluted and painstaking investigations by insisting that "RC seems to be still grounded in the DL [Descartes-Locke metaphysics] understanding of *experiences themselves* and their *thinkable* relation to external (ontological) reality" (§65). What does it mean that a given conception or theory or theoretical approach is grounded in metaphysics? Werner gives a very superficial and brief account of the notion of grounding. He writes:

> ❝The metaphysical context of the *constructivism–realism* dispute should therefore be uncovered. This is what I mean by metaphysical grounding of RC, and at the starting point I mean nothing more than this.❞ (§22)

This is acceptable at the starting point, but what about the ending point? We are not given any clue as to how to fulfil our curiosity, as the word "grounding" does not even reappear in the article. From what has been said at the beginning, one can infer that for Werner the search for metaphysical grounding of RC is closely connected with the search for an appropriate metaphysical context for close examination of this view. Unfortunately, saying this is saying almost nothing, especially when contrasted with detailed and elaborate debates about metaphysical grounding in the rapidly burgeoning literature on this notion (see, e.g., Correia & Schnieder 2012).

« 6 » In any case, one of the most significant attempts to establish that the notion of knowledge does not have to be coupled with the notion of representation, taken as a concept involving heavy metaphysical apparatus, has been undertaken by Huw Price (2013). He introduces the complementary notions of "e-representation" and "i-representation." The former is the notion of "answerability to the environment," and the latter is the concept of inferential or functional role of expressions. The category of representation should not be assimilated here to the classical notion of representation, understood as a crucial element of one's mental architecture, since Price declares himself to be an advocate of a robust anti-representationalism that does not require a substantially construed

notion of truth or adequacy (according to Price, the true predicate plays merely the role of generalizing device). It also does not require metaphysical grounding, no matter how interpreted, since e-representations enable one to terminate philosophical analysis on the e-world, which is the "i-world of the scientific vocabulary" (Price 2013: 55), and i-representations allows one to remain at the level of discussion about asking for reasons. Although one may disagree with Price (for example, John MacFarlane 2014), it is apparent that thorough discussion about the need to incorporate metaphysical threads into contemporary debates on RC, or other views mentioned by Werner, ought to appeal to the Price's proposal, since it is one of the most intriguing anti-metaphysical accounts of the relationship between cognition or knowledge and the world.

Adriana Schetz is an assistant professor at the Institute of Philosophy, University of Szczecin, Poland. Her interests include philosophy of mind, cognitive science, philosophy of psychology, and especially the problem of perception, consciousness, and animal cognition. She is the author of a book *Biological Externalism in the Theories of Perception*, published in Polish in 2014.

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Towards a Metaphysics for Constructivist Thought

Spyridon A. Koutroufinis
Technical Univ. of Berlin, Germany
kout1967/at/mailbox.tu-berlin.de

> **Upshot** · My commentary has three aims. Firstly, to provide additional support to Konrad Werner's correct insight that radical constructivism is based on a radical distinction between experienced reality and ontological reality. This is a strong metaphysical statement. Secondly, that radical constructivism is implicitly rooted in Cartesian ontological dualism. Thirdly, that Whitehead's process ontology provides a fruitful foundation for Werner's thesis that perceptions are metaphysically significant.

« 1 » Konrad Werner criticizes the anti-metaphysical attitude of radical constructivism (RC), as it has been introduced by Ernst von Glasersfeld. He argues that von Glasersfeld grounds his epistemology on a strict distinction between the knowing subject and the known object or experienced reality and ontological reality (§§17, 19, 21, 66, 67). This, according to Werner, *is a metaphysical assumption*. It seems that Werner has found *the* pivotal point of RC (of which I was not aware before reading his article). In order to emphasize the correctness of Werner's argument, I will present some central ideas of leading theorists of RC.

« 2 » In his "An Introduction to Radical Constructivism," von Glasersfeld tries to overcome subjective idealism and solipsism (which he considers as the inescapable fate of realism as soon as skeptical arguments are taken seriously) by claiming that:

> ❝we must find our way back to the very first steps of our theories of knowledge. Among these early steps there is, of course, the definition of the relationship between knowledge and reality, and this is precisely the point where radical constructivism steps out of the traditional scenario of epistemology. Once knowing is no longer understood as the search for an iconic representation of ontological reality, but, instead, as a search for *fitting* ways of behaving and thinking, the traditional problem disappears. Knowledge can now be seen as something that the organism builds up in the attempt to order the as such amorphous flow of experience by establishing repeatable experiences and relatively reliable relations between them.❞ (Glasersfeld 1984a: 39)

« 3 » Von Glasersfeld, and with him other leading theoreticians of contemporary constructivist thought, *which includes more than RC*, do not try to solve epistemological issues but to let them vanish by reducing cognition and knowledge to biological functions that serve an organism's survival. Whether there is a correspondence between ontological and experienced reality (the problem of skepticism) would be an inappropriate question since knowledge would have to serve only biological survival. Thus theories of knowledge might be entirely separated from ontologies or theories of being.

« 4 » Von Glasersfeld and other proponents of constructivist thought, such as

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