

Mysticism and Constructivism with reference to Deconstruction and Contemporary Education

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> Abstract • I explore some of the respective affinities and tensions between constructivism and mysticism. Through particular reference to Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction, I focus on selected themes raised by Gash's critique through an alternative lens of interpretation.

« 1 » Hugh Gash's target article raises significant issues with regard to somewhat surprising affinities that one can trace between a constructivist epistemology and a religious or mystical experience. In this commentary, I will focus in on selective aspects of this analysis while also bringing this connection into dialogue with Jacques Derrida's related critique of rationalism (in his deconstruction of traditional philosophical epistemology). In brief, I will also relate the significance of these emergent findings for a re-envisioning of the philosophy of education in a contemporary setting.

Select affinities of mysticism and constructivism

« 2 » Ernst von Glasersfeld's consideration of the rational and the mystical as two separate types of knowing, providing two different accounts of experience, is a significant example of how constructivism might be considered, as an epistemology, to be clearly distinct from mystical experience. The originality of Gash's approach is that instead of emphasising this dualism, he takes an alternative perspective to allow a surprising affinity to emerge. This approach examines the process of thinking to see if there may be synergies between so-called rational thinking and mystical experience, particularly when certain types of new ideas emerge. Here, at root, a fundamental shared position of both constructivism and mysticism is that they each recognise "the limits of human cognition" (§9).

« 3 » Moreover, this is taken further through linking constructivist epistemology with an experience of wonder or a prioritisation of wonder that we can identify at the heart of mystical experience. In an originary philosophical mode (I am thinking here of the origins of philosophical experience itself in early Greece, in the fifth century BCE), we can connect such "wonder" to the development of human insight and the process of knowledge formation itself, i.e., the process of coming-to-know. Of course, while this may be seen as referring to knowledge of the world, it also refers back to self-knowledge or "knowing thyself" (Socrates's well-known original declaration of philosophy's intent). While this is the origin of epistemology as a discipline in history (articulated for example in Plato's *Republic*), one should also note that in this original philosophical formulation of epistemology "nonrational" (or what Plato called "nonpropositional" knowledge) is emphasised just as much as the rational component of knowledge.

« 4 » This scene of hermeneutic interpretation is not simple and Gash does not hide the complexity or potential tensions here. We can note the reasons why rationalism and mysticism might be seen as "belonging to different domains" (§39). Here, constructivism can be seen as a distinct and somewhat idiosyncratic form of the rationalist tradition (beginning with philosophy as a discipline but associated more specifically with the emergence of psychology as a discipline in the 19th century). However, we can also note that constructivism is not one homogeneous tradition of epistemology or critique. In this regard, what is referred to as "radical constructivism" can be viewed as working against any simple opposition or dualism between rationalism and mysticism. This is because for radical constructivism any mind-independent realism is a nonstarter; or to put it in different words, ontology is an illusion. following Gregory Bateson (§13).

« 5 » Again, this unknowability, this assertion of a certain agnosticism, is what opens the possibilities for a greater congruence between constructivism (in its most radical variety) and mystical experience. In this more agnostic epistemological framework, gaps necessarily (rather than merely accidentally) arise in the relation between concepts and the experience they are in-

tended to describe or correspond to. This necessity is not reductive but rather opens onto new potential forms of "emergent wonder," which can lead to new experience and insight (here, insight is no longer simply rational, according to Gash, for either the radical constructivist or the mystic). As a final further development of this argument, Gash goes on to make the claim that these forms of emergent wonder may be considered epiphanic: Surprises are commonplace, so the unexpected events that lead to wonder are special and uncommon, more like Kuhnian paradigm changes. Have we lost our sense of wonder and its power to help us find personal balance? (§18). This latter claim has interesting affinities with the original (and mystical) Platonic conception of "self-knowledge" – for example, as developed in the well-known Allegory of the Cave in Plato's paradigmatic text *The Republic*.

« 6 » Among the different phases of the argument we can distinguish in this exploratory relation between constructivism and mysticism, two particular claims appear to be fundamental.

« 7 » The first claim is that once we go beyond a more conventional constructivism towards a more radical epistemological form, we can distinguish the agnosticism that is the implication of the denial of a simple objectivism or "mind-independent reality." It is precisely this critique of objectivism that connects radical constructivism with the possibility of a mystical experience or mysticism as such. This argument seems a strong and convincing one and below I will trace how it can be connected sympathetically with Jacques Derrida's critique of traditional philosophical epistemology in his deconstructive form of thinking (Derrida 1977).

« 8 » The second claim is a striking if more controversial one. It is Gash's claim that the gaps in knowledge and in the relation between concepts and reality can be viewed as "epiphanies" (§19). As with the first argument, I will follow the thread of this argument below in relation to Derrida's own thinking. Here, we can identify a more problematical aspect to this discussion of constructivism and mysticism, although the somewhat hyperbolic claim of "epiphany" should not (and cannot *de jure*) be ruled out philosophically.

Mystical experience, constructivism and deconstruction

« 9 » If the relation between constructivism (and especially radical constructivism) and mystical experience is already a connection between two philosophies often kept distinct, I will now introduce a “third space,” as it were, into this discussion. This is the space of the postmodern philosophy of deconstruction, developed in its original and most powerful form by Derrida. Our rationale for making the connection with Derrida’s thought is that the two main claims outlined above can also be seen to be developed by Derrida in his own distinct way. Here we notice a strong affinity between mystical experience, constructivism and deconstruction. In this, we can see significant implications for philosophy as a discipline with regard to Gash’s findings and insights (for example, in relation to the status of epistemology in contemporary thought, §19). **There is an interesting comparison to be made in an interdisciplinary mode between philosophy and psychology.** With regard to the claim of a “sacred” or “epiphanic” aspect of the argument regarding wonder, we can also recognise a related attempt in Derrida’s work to reconsider the relation between philosophy and religious experience. Beyond the mere critique of epistemology in the first strand of the argument, this second aspect takes us into what we might term a more “reconstructive” dimension of philosophy – the connections with, for example, the thought of John Dewey (1970) are significant here. Let us take each of these strands of thought in turn.

« 10 » As with radical constructivism and mystical experience, we can see the movement of philosophical deconstruction as also elaborating a critique of certain knowledge or objectivism. This was not the mainstream interpretation of Derrida’s thought. Peter Trifonas (2004) shows how a very significant alternative interpretation of Derrida came from perhaps the most important philosopher of the previous generation of thinkers in Paris, Michel Foucault. Trifonas cites the vehement criticisms of Derrida by Foucault, who was one of Derrida’s original teachers at the École Normale Supérieure. “Foucault suggested that deconstruction is nothing but the elaborate expression of a new didactic, a new pedagogy of the text”

(ibid: 1). For Foucault, Derrida was attempting to assert a new epistemology and semantics of meaning. Against this view, a positive interpretation of the relevance of Derrida to pedagogy is articulated: “Rather what deconstruction is seeking to do is to point to the undecidability [of the institution] at the expense of the metaphysical grounding of its architectonics” (ibid). This concept of undecidability is central to the analysis of the importance of deconstruction and of Derrida, specifically for educational discourse. Unlike the clarity of the critical theory discourse of education, which has been accused by some critics of a certain “positivism” (Blake & Massachelein 2003), precisely because of its lack of undecidability (its excessive certainties), what is paradigmatic about deconstruction is the very instability of meaning it induces. This “undecidability” is exactly comparable or analogous to the critique of epistemology that we described above in relation to Gash’s interpretation of constructivism and mysticism. Both seek to show the limits of a rationalist knowledge *paradigm* while also pointing to potential existential and philosophical resources that lie beyond this criterion.

« 11 » Here, Trifonas invokes another central concept of Derrida’s, that of “aporia.” More specifically, he refers to the “tensions of its aporias” (Trifonas 2004: 1). In a similar vein, he also points to the need to eschew finalised solutions or completed understandings: “and there is no need to enact the last word on this topic” (ibid). It seems to me that one can argue for a congruence here between Derrida’s claims and the respective critique of knowledge that we traced above through radical constructivism and mystical experience.

« 12 » And what of the second strand of the argument, that such gaps or undecidables lead to “epiphanic” moments and can be described as “sacred”? Is there also an affinity between radical constructivism, mysticism and deconstruction? Certainly, this does not seem so clear-cut. If we can accept the critique of epistemology that shows up the inevitable gaps between conceptualism and realism, it seems a much larger and unsubstantiated claim to say that such gaps can so readily be described as “sacred.” For example, a devil’s-advocate position might argue that such “gaps” might lead to far more negative

conclusions including the absence of meaning, absurdity or even nihilism. This is a question that is too complex to answer here but we can say that, as with Gash’s argument, there is an emphasis in Derrida’s work that points in a similar direction. Rather than see such “gaps” or “undecidables” as negative or nihilistic, Derrida’s work instead seeks to affirm such moments as positive and exceptional – they become crucial transformers of our experience and of our possibilities in existence. In this context, Trifonas (2004) also refers significantly to both the “ethics” and the “politics” of deconstruction or the “ethics of deconstruction” as it applies to what he terms the “politics of education.” Along with a more specific critique of epistemology, then, there are undeniably possibilities within our discussion of the relation between constructivism and mystical experience that can lead to a new type of *education of hope*, or an education of “epiphany.” It has been our argument that Derrida’s work in deconstructive philosophy might also be a powerful ally for more radical forms of constructivism in precisely this regard.

References

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