

Mystifying Constructivism

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> Abstract • Returning to Wittgenstein's work, I trace the epistemological constraints applying to both the scientific and the mystical approaches. I make three suggestions as to how we might move forward in a different manner of speaking to change our minds about the apparent gaps between the rational and the mystical.

Introduction

«1» Ludwig Wittgenstein's purpose was to establish the limits of our world. In the preface of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he claimed, "The book will [...] draw a limit to thinking, or rather – not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts [...]" (Wittgenstein 1961: 3).

«2» Wittgenstein's therapeutic mission was in constructing his philosophy as a solution to the pathologies of the practice of philosophy. A characteristic of therapy is the reconstruction of language used to describe, explain and define problems.

«3» His well-known phrase "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 1961: §5.6), underlines the impossibility of any privileged access to the world. Since we must construct an understanding of the outside world via the construction of our experience, we do not have privileged access even to our own experience – since we must also construct *it* to create a meaning for experiential events.

«4» Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of our being locked in a cage the bars of which are created by the limits of our language. From the radical constructivist point of view, the inescapable bars of our cage are constituted by our epistemological constraints. Referring to the duality *rational/mystical* both of these are constrained within the same epistemological cage, where the bars include, among others,

- not having privileged access to the outside world;
- having no privileged access to our interior world of experiencing;

- having no privileged access even to our own thoughts (occurring wordlessly);
- being unable to share our experience with others.

«5» We have access only to our cognitive, worded modes of construction. All I can know is what I have words for. Experience cannot ever *tell* us anything. As Wittgenstein points out "Knowledge is not *translated* into words when it is expressed. The words are not a translation of something else that was there before they were" (Wittgenstein 1981: §191).

«6» Using rational thought is equally constrained as is that of the mystic in that neither has any privileged access to the domain that interests them. They can only describe their own experience of the world. An important part of Wittgenstein's therapeutic approach, therefore, was to be very careful about the assumptions we make regarding the relation of experience to knowledge. As he said, "The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing" (Wittgenstein 1974: §166).

«7» So, we can see that the construed gap between the rational and the mystical disappears when we see that they are both locked into an epistemological cage of *not knowing* and of *groundlessness*.

The gap disappears

«8» In §2 of his target article, Hugh Gash describes the gap between the domain of experience and the domain of explanations. The idea of a gap as a decisive break where two domains are separated can be seen as an intrinsic part of the human assembly. It is not only that we find ourselves locked into an epistemological box of *unknowing* but also the basic anatomy of the human brain shows that the brain has no direct access to the world that lies outside of its encasing skull. The brain is *locked into* the inner chamber of the skull and has no independent access to what is outside the skull. As Gerhard Roth observes:

“The brain, however, has no direct contact with the environment, and therefore the transition from the physical and chemical environment is a radical break. Everything we see, hear, smell, think, and feel is the result of a gigantic construction performance of the brain.” (Roth & Poerksen 2004: 118)

«9» Seen in this way, the *originating gap* of the brain/body anatomical duality could be seen as the prototype of all the other gaps that we may invent for ourselves. The series of gaps that we perceive as separating one level of existence from another is thus a mirroring of the structural configuration of the brain, which has no direct access to the outside world. The brain is structurally shut inside the skull and its data arrives already highly filtered via the senses.

«10» Wittgenstein, writing in the 1940s, anticipated the neuroscience of the past seventy years, observing “[t]he feeling of an unbridgeable gulf between consciousness and brain-process” (Wittgenstein 1968: §412).

«11» It is we humans who are the gap – we constitute and instantiate these gaps and it is a confusion to imagine that we somehow stumble over these pesky gaps in the world.

«12» Instead of continuing to treat rational/mystical as an antagonistic dichotomy, it is important not only to see them as locked together into the same cage of epistemological limitations but also to use this to elaborate alternative possible ways of going on together differently: to learn to speak differently within our networks of conversations. With this in mind I would now offer three suggestions for going forward in a different manner of speaking.

Suggestion 1 – Complementarity

«13» Referring to Gash's search for synergies (§36), I would make the suggestion that one way to reconstruct this antagonistic dichotomy is to see rational and mystical as a *complementarity* where each different level of construction contributes something necessary to making a satisfactory explanation. Each level of analysis provides different forms of description of unknowable reality, which cannot be stated adequately at some other level of construction. Instead of seeking synergies between the rational and the mystical it could be more productive to create a model where both of these dichotomous extremes are understood to be in a *complementarity* of mutual specification. The task is to reconstrue this pair not as an internecine dichotomy but as an inseparable twosome.

« 14 » Using Francisco Varela's "star/slash" (*) method, we may consider how selected pairs (such as rational/mystical) are related in a complementarity and, at the same time, remain distinct from each other. His method helps us to get from thinking in a simple duality to a useful trinity. He explains:

“* = the it / the process leading to it.

The slash in this *star* (*) statement is to be read as: ‘consider both sides of the /, ‘that is, ‘consider both the it and the process leading to it.’

Thus the slash here is to be taken as a compact indication of a way of transiting to and from both sides of it.” (Varela 1979: 99f)

« 15 » Using this form of analysis, we see that the duality “rational/mystical” is not only complementary but also is mutually specifying each of the other. This is not to be understood as a form of synthesis but is a more comprehensive systemic construction of how these two may be configured and interrelated. Varela comments: “dualities are adequately represented by *imbrication* of levels, where one term of the pair *emerges* from the other” (Varela 1979: 101).

« 16 » We could usefully apply Varela's notions on complementarity to many other common dualities, and not only to that of rational/mystical.

« 17 » Wittgenstein's work helps to avoid asking questions that are premised upon false dichotomies and conceptual confusions. The experience of all that is unsaid or unsayable creates the human desire for more to be said about our experiential world. He observes:

“This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.” (Wittgenstein 1965: 12)

« 18 » Reflecting on the Christian faith, he says:

“We are in a sort of hell where we can do nothing but dream, roofed in, as it were, and cut off from heaven. But if I am to be REALLY saved, – what I need is *certainty* – not wisdom, dreams, or speculation – and this certainty is faith. And faith is faith in what is needed by my *heart*, my *soul*, not my speculative intelligence. For it is my soul with its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that has to be saved, not my abstract mind.” (Wittgenstein 1980: 33e)

Suggestion 2 – Indwelling

« 19 » Wittgenstein describes how we may enter into very different states of experiencing reality (for example, feeling lifeless and isolated, or feeling involved participation), giving the idea that we may project ourselves beyond the bars of our cage by the way we exist in the space of intention.

« 20 » The question of how we get to feel that we are inside or outside events is an important part of the ways we generate meaningfulness in our experiential domain. Our use of intention puts us in the way of a participative involvement as opposed to an observer's detached outside positioning. The act of intending allows us to enter inside the events and be a part of the overall composition.

“When we intend, we exist in the space of intention, among the pictures (shadows) of intention, as well as with real things.” (Wittgenstein 1981: §233)

« 21 » He gives the example of dreaming:

“In dreams it sometimes happens that we first read a story and then are ourselves participants in it. And after waking up after a dream it is sometimes as if we had stepped back out of the dream and now see it before us as an alien picture.) And it also means something to speak of ‘living in the pages of a book.’” (Wittgenstein 1981: §233)

Suggestion 3 – The third way

« 22 » Wittgenstein tried to show that within our cage (where access to the *outside* or *inside* world was impossible) it was more productive to concentrate on what goes on *between* people in their various forms of life. He pushed us to look again at what we know spontaneously how to do together so as to generate new ways of going on in our living networks.

« 23 » From this point of view, moving away from the “inside/outside” duality to what occurs *between* people in their ongoing spontaneous interactions avoids unanswerable questions. He wanted to develop our daily sensibilities from within the praxis of living, from what we already know how to do (but take for granted) in our ongoing coordinations of conduct together, so that we are able to continue participating in our given forms of life. Working from within our knowing how to go on together was a way to generate the conditions for emergent novelty and reduce our cloud of confusion. He suggests dismantling our “myth of mental process” as part of the task of reconstructing our common understandings. He comments:

“But don't think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all. – For *that* is the way of speaking that is confusing you. Rather ask yourself: in what kind of case, under what circumstances do we say ‘Now I can go on,’ if the formula has occurred to us?” (Wittgenstein 1981: §446)

Conclusion

« 24 » This third way I am suggesting here refers back to Gash's observations about the struggle to put words on “experience that is beyond description” (§27). I am recommending Wittgenstein's advice of avoiding introspection and thus avoiding the philosophical danger of “producing a myth of symbolism, or a myth of mental processes. Instead of simply saying what anyone knows and must admit” (Wittgenstein 1981: §211).

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RECEIVED: 4 AUGUST 2019
ACCEPTED: 6 AUGUST 2019

The Constructivism of Mystical Theology

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> Abstract • Gash follows a prescient argument concerning constructivism and mysticism. Mysticism may equate to noetic religious, spiritual, and mystical experiences involving subjectivity and objectivity, and people experience "faith" or belief in the deity, which involves intellection, conceptual discrimination, decision-making and a range of technical, rational and intellectual tools. Von Glasersfeld's assumptions, and those of other constructivists are, not so far removed from mystical theological approaches to the deity.

« 1 » Hugh Gash's target article presents an interesting and prescient argument for examining the relationship between constructivism and mysticism and metaphysics, however, some sort of common understanding as to what these terms mean is needed to begin with. John Tinsley (1989) begs caution when defining mysticism, since some expressions of Christianity equate "mysticism" with "neo-platonism," e.g., as in German "reformed" theology. Some users of the term equate mysticism with any kind of "transcendental reality" (Tinsley 1989: 387). How is Gash defining the term "mysticism" precisely? Q1 Is he concerned wholly with mystical thought, i.e., that which concerns the cognising of mystical experience or theology in its broadest sense? Whereas this might be thought of as a pernicious question to some extent and could lead one down different avenues, it still needs answering to some degree. Finally, what is the relationship between scientific thinking and mystical thinking within the constructivist paradigm? Q2 I might accept the theories of the Big Bang, evolution by natural selection, and quantum mechanics intellectually without requiring direct evidence but rather on the basis of acceptance by authority in the formal scientific community. How is that "belief" in scientific theories an analogue or homologue of religious belief? This com-

mentary aims to explore possible avenues for the investigation of experience, whether mystical or not, that is pertinent to constructivist sensitivities concerning epistemology.

« 2 » Tinsley (1989) sets out a protocol for examination of mystical experience through checking against common experience, determining whether a pattern exists. If this protocol is followed, there are five main features:

- a a compelling sense of unity with the deity;
- b time is transcended;
- c the experience is reasoned to go beyond subjectivity;
- d there is a suffused sense of well-being; and
- e there is an overwhelming sense of "presence."

« 3 » Notwithstanding the usual or typical understanding of mystical experience, these five features are not wholly inclusive nor exclusive. So for example, the first feature might be contingent on commitment to a religion, and thus individuals who do not subscribe to a religion experience mystical encounters without this feature. However, if deity is taken to be non-specific, this feature can be retained.

« 4 » The issue of subjectivity is relevant both to mysticism and constructivism, and Søren Kierkegaard stressed the subjectivity of "faith" or belief in deity as a decision (Clements 1989) that may be seen as an especial variant of the Lutheran three-fold analysis of faith as:

- a *notitia* (knowledge of what to believe);
- b *assensus* (intellectual acceptance); and
- c *fiducia* (personal commitment).

« 5 » Mysticism might refer to any understanding, perception or encounter with an experiential reality, the universe, and "being" that falls outside of normative scientific explanation. However, we see immediately that this is a huge range of thoughts, understandings and experiences that may or may not be systematised or categorised. Metaphysics might refer to a system of belief encompassing the previously mentioned understanding, perception or encounter with experiential reality, the universe, and being that falls outside of normative scientific explanation. A "religion" therefore consists of a metaphysics, if it contains a systematic understanding (theology) of the