

line his distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive knowledge, Quale concludes from the concept of personal responsibility that the individual cannot “invoke cognitive arguments to demonstrate the validity of her own ethical convictions” (§31). Why not? In practical discourse we are involved in argumentation like this. The demonstration of validity is a result of communication; it is the argument that is considered the best, the most accepted, the most convincing within an ethical discourse. It is Jürgen Habermas who replaced the distinction between the rational/cognitive sphere and the irrational/non-cognitive sphere by dividing reasoning into different spheres of rationality/cognition (Habermas 1984: 99ff.). Elsewhere (Baum & Scholl 2000) I elaborated the parallels between RC and Habermas’s approaches to ethical questions (without ignoring the differences in epistemological questions between Habermas and RC).

« 5 » Finally, I agree with Quale’s insight that there is no strictly logical relationship between the cognition of what is the case (in the radical constructivist sense of reality construction) and should be the case (in a normative sense of moral or ethical beliefs). We differ in assessing the confirmability of cognitive and non-cognitive knowledge. Although it seems to be easier to agree on cognitive facts rather than on normative demands and although it makes sense to separate the different spheres of argumentation, both spheres are accessible to communication, reasoning and rationality.

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Constructivists Should Drop the Claim of Ethical Responsibility

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> Upshot • I agree with Quale’s argument for the ethical neutrality of constructivism. However, I want to point out that radical constructivism does not proclaim itself to be ethically neutral. Additionally, I want to criticize the somewhat ambivalent use of the term “personal responsibility” and argue that constructivists need to rethink and ultimately drop the claim of responsibility following from constructivism.

Radical constructivism is not self-proclaimedly ethically neutral

« 1 » Andreas Quale describes radical constructivism as proclaiming itself to be ethically neutral. I feel the claim is not an accurate description of radical constructivist discourse and that many constructivists have been less than consistent on this issue.

« 2 » Constructivists have taken part in passionate debates about the ethical implications of epistemologies. Partly as a reaction to hyperbolic claims of what harm constructivism would bring, “first generation” radical constructivists especially have made equally strong worded counterattacks. Heinz von Foerster, Ernst von Glasersfeld and Humberto Maturana have all denigrated realism for its supposed effects on ethics: realism has been described as an ingenious strategy for avoiding responsibility, leading to fear, dominance and regulation (Foerster 2010: 44). Realism has been said to lead people to become dangerous beasts and war mongers (Foerster & Pörksen 1998: 30) or merely tolerant (in the sense of a temporary suspension of inhibiting the other, even suspension of eliminating the other, Maturana & Pörksen 2002: 47).

« 3 » At the same time, they have praised constructivism’s positive ethical effects: constructivism is said to lead to respect and love (Maturana & Pörksen 2002).

Important radical constructivists have especially focused on a strong claim of ethical responsibility supposedly following from constructivism. Realism’s denial vs. constructivism’s embrace of responsibility is such a prominent theme that it can even be found in the early work of Josef Mitterer (1988: 28), whose perspective and style usually protect him from hyperbole.

« 4 » I thoroughly agree with Quale’s assessment of the ethical neutrality of constructivism, but many important authors clearly do not. To describe radical constructivism as self-proclaimedly ethically neutral misrepresents one of the most muddled aspects of constructivism.

The strong claim of ethical responsibility does not convince

« 5 » The strong claim of ethical responsibility could be paraphrased thus:

- 1 | Constructivism brings to the forefront human beings’ active role in formulating morals.
- 2 | Constructivists cannot be complacent about dominant morals of their society, but are pushed by their epistemological convictions to engage with the question of on which values they should build their morality.
- 3 | The insight into the fundamental contingency of one’s own world and morals fosters the values of inclusion and tolerance.

« 6 » This strong claim of ethical responsibility does not hold up, mainly because no action equals the state of epistemological doubt (see also Danelzik 2008). Any action, as well as inaction, is subject to moral scrutiny. Constructivists unavoidably employ some moral principles to which they are non-cognitively drawn. When right and wrong are on the line, there is no neutral ground and there is no argument why constructivists should not try to bring about the solution they feel is right. Given that every morality is contingent, the solution found might as well be the one suiting one’s own moral preferences.

« 7 » Most constructivists will try to implement their preferred solution, because they care and it is important to them. What means they use and how tolerant they are in specific conflicts are not determined by their meta-ethics but by the first-order

principles they non-cognitively subscribe to. Violence and marginalization of others is on the table for constructivists as well, as long as they feel strongly enough about the conflict in question.

« 8 » There is nothing in the theory to compel constructivists to be relativist or tolerant. Therefore, the limits of tolerance can be drawn very differently by constructivists. The symmetry between all moral convictions and 'worlds' can go both ways. Post-foundationalist intolerance is very possible. Actually, what *are* intolerance, the immoral indifference of too much tolerance and just the right amount of tolerance are judgments by observers about other peoples' moral convictions. Constructivists will be found on all points of this spectrum and in all roles in conflicts.

« 9 » This stipulation is backed up by how constructivists actually behave when it comes to conflicts that arise from fundamentally opposing views on what is right, virtuous or a good life – like the issue of female genital mutilation. To be flippant about the practical irrelevance of the meta-ethical difference: if you get shot, it doesn't matter whether the shooter thinks he is metaphysically backed up or Humberto Maturana, who – in his own words – still respects you and understands his line in the sand for violence to be contingent, but feels compelled to shoot you nevertheless because he thinks the world you bring forth is horrible (Maturana & Pörksen 2002: 48).

The ambivalent use of the term "personal responsibility" with regard to ethics

« 10 » While Quale clearly does not hold a strong claim of ethical responsibility, he at moments falls back on a pattern of language very established in constructivist discourse. This is emblematic of a constructivist discourse that often uses residuals of a strong claim of positive ethical effects when pragmatically justifying constructivism, while actually refraining from von Foerster's and others' claims. He is somewhat ambivalent when he writes that an individual is being "elevated by the theory of RC into a position of personal responsibility with respect to ethical issues" and formulates his argument as if a person had a

moral obligation to consider effects of one's own ethic on others or as if there is a duty to construct one's own ethic (§28).

« 11 » I am doubtful that the terms "ethical responsibility" or "personal responsibility with regard to ethics" can be untangled from the strong claim in the context of constructivist discourse. For that reason alone, the term should be used with extreme caution, if at all. Furthermore, Quale's and others' actual, more modest claim is misleadingly identified by the term "ethical responsibility."

The weak claim of "personal responsibility" is a misnomer

« 12 » Regardless of a few ambivalent sentences, Quale clearly espouses a weak claim of personal responsibility with regard to ethics. He does not think that constructivism imposes a moral duty or obligation. The weak claim contends merely that human beings form ethical principles, virtues, judgments or sentiments no matter what epistemology they ascribe to.

« 13 » We should be aware that when we speak of constructivism effecting personal responsibility with regard to ethics, we suggest a positive ethical effect of the epistemology, when actually we just say that (most) human beings will unavoidably form some kind of morality, be it humanistic or anti-humanistic, compassionate or monstrous – or "asocial," as Quale puts it.

« 14 » Additionally, Quale makes the point that this process is at least partly removed from consciousness, while the term "responsibility" is usually associated with choice. Human beings are not able to choose their morality; they have one (that they are for the time being non-cognitively bound to). The meaning of "responsibility" in the weak claim is so far removed from what is usually meant by the term that it seems like we are having our cake and eating it to. While we avoid making unfounded claims, we still give our preferred epistemology an air of positive ethical effects. It would be more intellectually honest to stick to Quale's main point: constructivism is ethically neutral.

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Some Questions about Responsibility

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> **Upshot** • Radical constructivism views ethics as an individual responsibility. What are the limits of that responsibility? I pose some questions but do not accept the responsibility to answer them. Radical constructivism may be neutral but it need not be indifferent. An ethically neutral constructivism need not construct an ethically neutral constructivist.

« 1 » As Andreas Quale states, it is "the responsibility of the individual knower to construct her own ethic" (§40). How serious is that responsibility? My intention is not to answer this question but rather to frame some related issues that others might be tempted to tackle.

« 2 » As pointed out in Lochhead (2013), Ernst von Glasersfeld firmly believed that each individual is responsible for the nature and consequences of his or her own constructions. Even more, the radical constructivists whom I have known all felt rather passionately that every individual has the responsibility actively to construct ethical principles and to live by them. They viewed unethical behavior as behavior that was not guided by the individual's own ethical standards (§24). Of course in practice, the detection of such "unethical behavior" is an interpretation of behavior that the critic has constructed as being behavior that does not fall within the guidelines of