ON THE ACTUALITIES
AND POSSIBILITIES OF CONSTRUCTIONISM:
TOWARDS DEEP EMPIRICISM

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Abstract: Drawing from the example of critical psychology, this paper examines how dissatisfaction with an existing scientific paradigm can stimulate interest in philosophy and social theory. The emergence of a social constructionist understanding of scientific knowledge in prominent dialects of critical psychology is related to a combination of scientific and political concerns, and briefly set in the context of three important strands of twentieth century philosophy: existential hermeneutics, ordinary language philosophy and poststructuralism. These strands agree on at least two issues: the rejection of metaphysics and the ontological foregrounding of the notion of discourse or language-in-use. These philosophies have influenced the development of discursive methods and constructionist epistemologies in special sciences such as psychology and sociology. It is suggested, however, that both the commitment against metaphysics and the prioritising of discourse are problematic, and that a process metaphysics based on the three pillars of possibility, mediation and actuality (or pattern, matrix and activity) might be articulated in order to overcome the bifurcation of nature tacitly accepted by the commitment to a discursive ontology.

Keywords: p/m grammar distinction; social constructionism; constructivist metaphysics; potentiality; actuality.

Opening Remarks on Philosophy of Science

Lacking the credentials to do otherwise, I approach issues in the philosophy of science as a social psychologist and not as a philosopher. Perhaps significantly, however, I write as a social psychologist who has felt the need to engage with philosophy. My current stance on how the relationship between philosophy and science *should* be conceived is quite conventional: we are dealing with a matter of the relationship between the general and the special. Philosophy concerns the most general concepts and each of the special sciences is a limitation of philosophy, dealing with specific types of entity (hence physics limits itself to that genus of facts we call the physical whilst biology limits itself to that genus of facts named as organic). With its more general concern, philosophy would articulate principles and concepts that can be employed in all of the more special knowledge domains. It would formulate general principles. This takes for granted that there is more to be said about the universe than would be expressed by simply summing the knowledge of all of the special sciences.

Naturally, according to this conception, philosophy must learn from science, but also science should benefit from the philosophical concern with the 'bigger picture'. The fields are

thus intimately interlaced. Science, whether it knows it and likes it or not, must always inherit and presuppose general level principles derived from philosophy, and philosophy must derive its generalities through an engagement with the specifics continually offered up by more special domains, such as science. I also take for granted that the most general concepts (metaphysical first principles) will always suffer from inadequate formulation, since they are formulated by finite beings using inadequate vocabularies with limited insight. Sure knowledge is impossible. This, however, is no reason to abandon the task of articulating a coherent account of the bigger picture, especially since the results of this effort will be at play in scientific practices whether we care about this or not. Sure knowledge that we will die is, in a comparable way, no good reason for being unconcerned with life. It seems to me that it is better to care, perhaps precisely *because* of our irredeemable finitude.

One implication of this position on the interlacing of philosophy and science is that the relationship between philosophy and science will vary depending upon the practical adequacy of the more general principles at play in a science. Three such scenes of interlacing can be identified. First, in the early days of a science there will still be a concern to discover adequate general principles, and hence there will be no clear distinction from philosophy. Second, a mature science, by contrast, will be content to take its generalities for granted and will deploy them unquestioningly in the discovery and clarification of novel particulars. In this context (which Thomas Kuhn (1969) called 'normal science'), scientific activity is clearly distinguished from philosophy, and the latter often disparaged as unnecessary. Third, whenever a science faces a significant novelty its general principles will be opened to challenge and its subsequent efforts to invent more applicable generalities will lend the science a newly philosophical character (Kuhn referred to this type of scenario as a 'paradigm shift'). For example, Planck's discovery of the discontinuous nature of energy and Einstein's general theory of relativity were significant novelties with which subsequent physics—and not just physics—has had to grapple. These novelties constituted a profound challenge to previously accepted general principles about, amongst other things, the nature of space and time, about the relationality of the universe, and about the fundamental nature of entities. It is thus no accident that many of the physicists who rose to the challenge of reforming basic ideas—such as Heisenberg, Bohr, Schrodinger and Born—were also active philosophers. Furthermore, the general ideas that were re-formulated as part of the quantum and relativity revolutions themselves included philosophical presuppositions that had been inherited by Galileo, Newton and co. from the medieval scholastics steeped in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, and whether they function adequately or not, the concepts available to us depend upon our philosophy. We thus neglect philosophy at our peril.

The position on philosophy of science I have sketched above is, however, routinely neglected. It is rejected because it sounds like *metaphysics,* and if there is one thing that commands universal agreement in the 21st century university it is the rejection of metaphysics and cosmology. Rejection of metaphysics and cosmology appears to be the one thing that unites positivists, critical realists, pragmatists and radical postmodern social scientists alike. The Wittgensteinians, the Derridians, the Foucaultians, the Heideggerians, the Bourdieuians and the Butlerians all agree with August Comte that metaphysics must be superseded: they simply happen to think that positivism must also be superseded since it retains a residual metaphysics of presence, and hence inadvertently partakes in that which it pretends to discard. Likewise, although the proponents of general systems theory and general structuralism took the baton of generality from the hands of philosophers, in so doing they carefully avoided the notion of metaphysics by stressing their scientific, not philosophical, calling.

Alfred North Whitehead was the last great metaphysician. In the 'what is an event?' chapter of his book on Leibniz, Giles Deleuze describes Whitehead as "the successor" or diadoche, and as the "last great Anglo-American philosopher before Wittgenstein's disciples spread their misty confusion" (1993, 76). He appears to suggest that Whiteheadian philosophy was effectively assassinated. Whitehead in turn described his own work as an effort to rescue Bergson's "type of thought" from the charge of anti-intellectualism, and was keenly aware of the growing antagonism towards metaphysics. And yet, for Whitehead, metaphysics (which he suggested calling instead 'pan-physics' (1922/2007, 4) and cosmology are basically about the integrative and synthesizing ambition to move from the particular to the more general, and to articulate a coherent account of general principles which apply to all of the more specific domains. Cosmology, wrote Whitehead (1929/1958, 86), "is not a mere juxtaposition of various sciences. It generalizes beyond any special science, and thus provides the interpretative system which expresses their interconnection".

Now, as a psychologist, it seems to me that this task of expressing the interconnection between different forms of knowledge and showing how they fit together is particularly important when one is dealing with psychological questions and issues. This is because psychology can not—or perhaps I should say *ought* not—avoid the fact that it deals with an immensely complex subject matter. In fact, it deals with a subject matter that spans the territories of practically all fields of knowledge. Any act of human experience (such as a feeling of guilt about splitting up a relationship), in so far as it presupposes the receptivity of a complex nervous system housed in a body in interaction with other bodies, involves facets that are proper to the biological sciences, and also facets proper to chemistry and physics as well. But equally so, this act of experience, involves facets that are proper to the social and historical sciences, since our experiences are mediated by language and take place in micro and macro social contexts with their own dynamic historicity. The expression of that experience is also relevant to poetry and the arts, and no doubt to religion too. Finally, that experience may also be conscious and subjective, belonging just to the one who has it, there and then. This most cursory examination of an experience indicates that we human beings are simultaneously creatures of communication, creatures of bio-chemistry, creatures of consciousness and, perhaps above all, creature of creativity.

The comprehension of human life, we might say, *demands* an interpretive system which expresses the interconnection between different forms of knowledge since human life *is* an expression of the interconnection of what otherwise seem to be diverse aspects of being. As the history of psychology has surely proved, narrow-minded specialism in this context is a certain recipe for distortion, profound misunderstanding and consequent mis-representation. It should not be forgotten that this will be distortion, misunderstanding and misrepresentation of *ourselves*. Our own 'being', and that means our own 'becoming', both collectively and personally is at stake. Rather than face the challenge of articulating better general level concepts, psychologists have tended to push prematurely towards a parody of Kuhnian normal science achieved, not through genuine consensus, but by way of a combination of fiat and a dogmatic denial that there are important facets of human existence that are not expressed in terms of its own primary concepts (whether those be 'behaviour', 'information processing', 'natural selection' or 'connectionism'). The exceptions to this rule tend to be the work of philosophers or philosophically oriented psychologists, and the relevance of such philosophy is all to easily dismissed in a discipline which fetishises the empirical. Psychology has thus staggered from quasi-paradigm to quasi-paradigm, denying and repressing the philosophical interest its own crises have aroused.

Matter and Meaning

One such notable exception is the psychological work of philosopher of science Rom Harré. Mainstream psychology and sociology, he writes:

> tend to focus on what Bhaskar (1989, 40) has called 'the actual'. But on the way of thinking that I am setting out in this article, the focus of enquiry into human affairs should encompass that which is hugely broader than the actual, namely the field of the possible, its shape and its boundaries and its transformation with time… The Aristotelian ontology of active beings reaching out in the enabling polis towards what degree of perfection a person might achieve, is a concrete, sharply focused and, with its morality of virtues, a concretely moral psychology… Psychology and sociology ought to be much more sciences of possibility than they are in their current forms, and in that way they should be much more like physics (Harré 1997, 178).

Here, Harré argues explicitly for an ontology grounded by way of the two key general concepts of possibility and actuality, although he does not go into detail about either of these. The generality of these concepts—which will be further examined later in the paper—he suggests, permits applicability to psychology, sociology and physics alike. In my view, a key problem for the philosophy of psychology is the problem of how to articulate the distinctness of 'the psychological' from the organic and the physical whilst simultaneously allowing for interrelations between these domains. Harré, the above quotation notwithstanding, has for the most part seen fit to stress the former rather than the latter aspect. In hardening the distinction between the physical/chemical/organic and the psychological, Harré has deliberately blurred the distinction between the psychological and the socio-cultural, thus allying psychology with the social sciences and humanities (an understandable strategy given the hegemony of the natural science vision of psychology). He has thus long argued for a fundamental ontological division between things material and things to do with persons: "Realism in the physical sciences and realism in the human sciences are not the same" (Harré 1997, 174). Harré presents this in terms of two grammars: a p-grammar applicable to persons and an m-grammar applicable to molecules. M-grammar concerns causally deterministic interactions and is the ontology of choice for natural scientists, whilst p-grammar concerns the intentional actions of persons construed as more or less skilled performers subject to normative constraints. The intentional performances of p-grammar are constrained and mediated both by materialities that pertain to m-grammar (a tennis serve presupposes an able body and the laws of physics), and by discursive conditions (such as the rules of tennis), whereas m-grammar does not admit of discursive constraints. Scientific descriptions of persons will thus entail a certain hybridity of ontology, since both causal m-grammars and intentional p-grammars are routinely at play, as well as habitually organised regularities that may be molecular (as with a reflex eye-blink) or discursive (as with a deliberate wink) in origin.

The p/m grammar distinction provides a powerful basis from which to critique forms of psychology which do indeed reduce human beings to m-grammar and hence ignore the importantly distinctive powers typical of human activity. This can be viewed as a colonisation of personhood by m-grammar. The distinction also provides much needed guidance for the invention of more adequate forms of psychology. Nevertheless, in adopting such a paradoxically *dual* ontology it is wise to be aware of an explicit bifurcation between things in the universe to which causality alone pertains, and things whose activities are governed by monitored intentionality: matter and meaning. The concept of discourse is decisive in marking this

distinction, since discourse does not pertain to m-grammar. Consider in this light the following remarkable passage from Harré (1997, 183):

> We can refine our understanding of neurophysiological enabling conditions and our phenomenological acuteness indefinitely without coming close to answering the bogus question: 'How are mind and brain related?' as if they stood hand in hand. To explain, in scientific terms, is to describe a mechanism, the workings of which link the explanandum with the explanans. But of what nature could the mechanism be in the case of consciousness? It could not be neural, since its final state must be phenomenological. It could not be phenomenological since its initial state must be neural. Why can I be so confident in these claims? It is because the ontologies of each 'side' of the correlation are radically disjoint. Just look at the grammars: On the one 'side' there are molecules and their structures and on the other side are persons and their actions. Molecules as subjects of predication cannot take predicates such as 'responsible for', while persons as subjects of predication cannot take predicates like 'oxidised'. There is lots of fascinating scientific work to be done in refining our knowledge of how brains work, and in honing our linguistic capacities for self-reports. But the explanatory question is a meaningless extension of the scope of a grammatical model whose home base is elsewhere. There is no 'mind/body problem'.

Unsurprisingly given his own inspirations, Harré's argument resonates with the ordinary language tradition of Wittgenstein (1958) and Ryle (1975). Harré can be so confident in his claims because of his rootedness in this philosophical tradition. But that does not make his statement true, and we psychologists are well aware that there is no necessary connection between confidence and correctness. To apply a predicate like 'responsible for' to a subject like a molecule would be, for Ryle, to commit a category mistake, and for Wittgenstein, to mix incommensurable grammars. But the notion of a category error takes for granted that we know in advance which categories different things properly belong within. Coming to such knowledge in this context requires all sorts of presuppositions, not least the assumption that there is no phenomenology proper to neurones; that causality is a purely physical affair; and that it pertains to entities which are purely material in nature. Whitehead's philosophy of organism, interestingly enough, challenges each of these assumptions and does so in a manner entirely consistent with Einstein's equations linking space and time and Planck's energy quanta. His theory of actual occasions would indeed ascribe a phenomenology to neurones and much else besides. It also involves a thorough rethinking of causality as a composite of efficient and teleological aspects, and it replaces the notion of brute materiality with the fundamental concept of the event or occasion of actuality. Interestingly, Harré's defence of his highly confident assertion reduces to citing the authority of Herbert Spencer, whom he quotes as follows: "Can the oscillation of a molecule be represented side by side with a nervous shock, and the two recognised as one? No effort enables us to assimilate them. That a unit of feeling has nothing in common with a unit of motion becomes more than ever manifest when we bring the two into juxtaposition" (Spencer, cited in Harré, 1997, 180). Contrast this, however, with the following extract from Whitehead's *Process and reality* (1927-8, 254):

> If we substitute the term 'energy' for the concept of a quantitative emotional intensity, and the term 'form of energy' for the concept 'specific form of feeling,' and remember that in physics 'vector' means definite transmission from elsewhere, we see that this metaphysical description of the simplest elements in the constitution of actual entities agrees absolutely with the general principles according to which the notions of modern physics are framed. The 'datum' in metaphysics is the basis of the vector-theory in physics ; the quantitative

satisfaction in metaphysics is the basis of the scalar localization of energy in physics; the 'sensa' in metaphysics are the basis of the diversity of specific forms under which energy clothes itself... the general principles of physics are exactly what we should expect as a specific exemplification of the metaphysics required by the philosophy of organism. (p.116)… The physics theory of the structural flow of energy has to do with the transmission of simple physical feelings from individual actuality to individual actuality. Thus some sort of quantum theory in physics..., is to be expected.

It is of course beyond the scope of this paper to try to settle this debate. What is clear, however, is that its settlement requires the kind of sophisticated engagement with general level concepts that is to be found in philosophy. For example, I suspect that Whitehead would question Harré's tacit adoption of the subject/predicate ontology assumed in statements such as "molecules as subjects of predication cannot take predicates such as 'responsible for', while persons as subjects of predication cannot take predicates like 'oxidised'". For Whitehead, it is the importation of this assumption into ontology by way of ordinary language that has done most to hinder the development of metaphysics. Whitehead's philosophy of organism entails the wholesale replacement of an ontology of subjects qualified by predicates with an ontology of events or occasions of actuality. The actual occasion is thus the most general concept in his metaphysics: "'actual occasions'—are the final real things of which the world is made up. There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real." (1927-8, 18). From this Whiteheadian perspective, it is Ryle and Harré who have made the 'category mistake' of illegitimately applying an everyday grammar of subject and predicate (a red ball, a heavy table) to what is in fact an unfolding universe composed at each instant of trillions of coordinated atomic events.

I have lingered over Harré's contribution since it is amongst the most profound of such ontological suggestions and since it neatly illustrates a core difficulty involved in the task of generalising beyond any special science and providing an interpretative system expressing their interconnections. With the important exception of his comment about possibility and actuality, Harré leaves us, not with an expression of interconnection, but with a stark bifurcation between the world of human society and culture, on the one hand, and the world of nature on the other. We are left with two ontologies, and we are discouraged from looking for bridges. Before suggesting an alternative, in the next section I will reflect on how, in the special field of psychology, this bifurcation has been deepened in recent years.

Telling Stories, Constructing Realities

I begin this section with a rather personal story of my days as an undergraduate student of psychology at the University of Reading, England. Like many of the more socially minded psychologists of my generation, I must confess that I became disillusioned with the dominant tradition of experimental psychology. This disillusionment took shape both on *scientific / theoretical* and on *political / ethical* grounds. As a sensitive undergraduate I was quickly confronted with what I took to be an obsession with converting evidently complex and meaning-saturated phenomena into quantifiable variables that can be entered into an experimental set up (i.e. what Harré would call the colonisation of the person world by m-grammar). Although at first I dared not say it, this appeared to me to be less about securing a genuine understanding of the subject matter than about mimicking the scientific practices of colleagues in departments such as biology or physics. Furthermore, ethically and politically, this seemed to amount to a crass understanding of the nature of human nature and, at worst, to direct complicity

with what the more radical amongst my fellow students would call the 'military industrial complex'. In saying this I don't mean to disparage the motivations of my lecturers, who were evidently very intelligent and often rather pleasant and well-intentioned individuals. Perhaps there was something about the time and the place that put me, and it turned out, several of my fellow students, curiously at odds with the discipline we had chosen to study. It was not that I was unable to meet the challenge (I was quite good at statistics and experimental design, for instance), but that I felt in some way *unsatisfied*.

In this context of scientific and political questioning, it was a great relief to be able to combine my psychology degree with some courses from sociology, and to sit in on philosophy lectures. It was also exciting to gradually discover that more erudite renderings of my own doubts and intuitions existed in various published internal and external critiques of psychology, many of which, as I will discuss in more detail below, were gathering under the general label of 'social constructionism' (cf. Gergen 1985, Harré 1983). It was even more inspirational to discover, in the form of the late Rex Stainton Rogers, a critical psychologist in my own psychology department. I went on to conduct a PhD under Rex's supervision on the social construction of jealousy and then to co-author two books with him and others in which we contributed to the development of a broadly social constructionist critique of, and alternative to, social psychology (Curt 1994, Stainton Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson and Stainton Rogers 1995).

This episode gave me direct experience of the way in which dissatisfaction with a dominant research paradigm can lead to a growing involvement with philosophy and social theory. It seemed to me that the brightest psychologists of my cohort (certainly the small group of us awarded first class degrees and pursuing postgraduate training) were pulled increasingly towards theory and philosophy in an attempt to better articulate our dissatisfaction with existing approaches and to better conceptualise a more viable alternative. We did not want to abandon psychology, but we could not 'knuckle down' and accept it as we found it. As well as trying to keep up with the psychology literature, we were reading Foucault alongside Fanon, Derrida alongside Deleuze, Heidegger alongside Harré, and Wittgenstein alongside Whitehead. This was quite a workload. By contrast, those colleagues and teachers satisfied with a natural science 'factors and variables' approach to psychology were rarely interested in theory and philosophy. Either they simply did not see its relevance or they were positively hostile towards it. One of my more animated psychology lecturers would attend occasional philosophy lectures with the sole intent of ridiculing the backwardness of philosophers (the same interventions were viewed differently by the philosophers, of course, and with a degree of embarrassment on my part). Later, whilst I was a lecturer in psychology at University College, London, to give a second anecdotal example, a world famous psychologist of emotion challenged me over lunch to state one useful thing philosophy could offer to psychology. He clearly was not well disposed to accept my tentative suggestions about the relevance of Spinozist monism to some of his experiments on emotion (for more, see Brown and Stenner 2001). These kinds of responses are probably quite typical of those engaged in 'normal science'. Why bother with time-consuming philosophical criticism when one's scientific paradigm is in perfectly good working order and when there are plenty of empirical puzzles left to solve? I am not alone in agreeing with Kuhn's assessment, however, that psychology has not reached the state of normal science, and is far from having an uncontentious set of workable concepts and theories (cf. Teo et al., in press). It struck me that, in this context, the attitude of my colleagues was a little like those who, in Whitehead's (1922/ 2007) phrase, "thank Providence that they have been saved from the perplexities of religious enquiry by the happiness of birth in the true faith".

I suggested above that much of the critical reflection on psychology that I was personally aware of coalesced under the label of 'social constructionism'. One of the first books Rex Stainton Rogers recommended to me as an undergraduate, for example, was Berger and Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*. Social constructionism first emerged in this explicit form (i.e. with 'social construction' in the title) as part of the sociology of knowledge in the 1960s, and Jeff Coulter applied a variant of this sociology to some psychological issues in his 1979 volume *The Social Construction of Mind*. By the mid 1980s it had spread into the critical fringes of psychology proper. For better or for worse, a key phase of this coalescence of social constructionism in the discipline of psychology happened during the period of my undergraduate and postgraduate training (from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s). To my knowledge, the first psychology book bearing the phrase was Ken Gergen's and Keith Davis's (1985) *The Social Construction of the Person*, swiftly followed by Rom Harré's (1986) edited volume *The Social Construction of Emotions*. Celia Kitzinger, who had just completed a PhD at Reading with Rex, published her thesis under the title *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* in 1987.

Retrospectively, the appeal of social constructionism is obvious: it promised simultaneously to satisfy both the *scientific / theoretical* doubts and the *political / ethical* doubts, and in so doing it introduced an irresistible *vitality* into research and teaching. Where experimental psychology aimed to derive general laws from concrete facts and thus to generate universal knowledge, social constructionism viewed knowledge as an inherently social and indeed political affair, bound up with the cultural and historical specificities and power dynamics of a given time and place. It was obvious, for example, that the sexological discourses discussed by Kitzinger in the context of the pathologisation of homosexuality were, despite their scientific credentials, as much a political as a scientific intervention. It was equally obvious that a critical approach to such matters required one to engage with a little history and a little understanding of society and culture. It then becomes clear that the so called facts are rather contentious versions of reality bolstered by the authority of science and medicine, themselves historically emergent discursive practices whose genealogies are inseparable from broader issues (such as transforming modes of power and governance). This potent combination of scientific and politically emancipatory agendas is grandly summed up in Mary Gergen's (1989, 436-7) social constructionist critique of Moscovici's social representations theory:

> From a feminist standpoint, social representations can be regarded as the invisible bastions of male supremacy in the world. From this perspective, the patriarchal systems of power are composed of unexamined social representations regarding the 'nature of the world'. Thus, if we believe that the world is 'given' to be a certain way, then we do not try to change it. But if we regard 'reality' as socially constructed 'representations' of the world, then our belief in their inevitability or moral necessity might be challenged, and we might view the world as otherwise. If we were to alter these social representations, we would be altering the social order as well. (Let us imagine, for example, how a university would be restructured if the notion of hierarchies no longer existed). The deconstruction of certain social representations could ideally result in a reflexive reorientation of society, perhaps in more humane directions. This effort, I believe, would serve emancipatory goals for the enhancement of many forms of life on planet earth.

Apart from the combination of science and politics, what is distinctive about this social constructionism is its claim to do away with a philosophically or scientifically established vantage point from which to judge the adequacy of competing constructions. In an earlier part

of the article quoted above, Gergen hence takes issue with Moscovici because he retains the natural scientific aim of establishing facts and laws which might allow a classic distinction to be drawn between representations based on mere opinion and those based on scientific knowledge. A Marxist or a critical realist feminist might share Gergen's concern to challenge oppressive constructions of reality, but would do so in the name of a more 'human direction' grounded in a form of knowledge that provides the basis of the challenge precisely because it is exempted from such a challenge. Gergen's constructionism does not permit a distinction between 'construction' or 'representation' and 'reality', since the two are equated. In sum, unlike more traditional critiques which tended to employ notions like 'myth' (as in Szasz's [1962] *The Myth of Mental Illness* or Newman's [1991] *The Myth of Psychology*) and 'ideology' (as with neo-Marxist critical psychology), social constructionism promised to do away altogether with the distinction between 'good science' and 'pseudoscience' or between 'fact' and 'fiction'. It is not that some aspects of psychology are solidly scientific whilst others are shamefully political: all psychology is political, and the less awareness of this, the more it applies. Ideology and truth, myth and reality, were hence just two more dichotomies begging for deconstruction by a new paradigm of psychology that separated itself completely from the traditional natural science approach.

The more one read of this kind of material, the more one realized how much more reading was to be done. One had to read beyond disciplinary boundaries, and one quickly addressed very general and abstract issues that required engagement with social theory and philosophy. It suddenly appeared as if social science disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and even history were indispensible tools for the task of 'relativising' and 'periodising' psychological knowledge within cultural, social and historical discursive formations. These social sciences seemed to share with critical psychology a new preoccupation with abstract questions of ontology and epistemology, and these questions in turn, of course, pointed directly to philosophy. How to understand Coulter's or Harré's brand of social constructionism without a firm grasp of Wittgenstein, Austin and Ryle? How to understand Gergen without Gadamer or Gadamer without Heidegger? How to understand Kitzinger without an engagement with radical feminism and Foucault?

With respect to philosophy, for the sake of simplification it is possible to identify at least three strands of twentieth century philosophy that were at play in the heady mix of ideas circulating amongst critical psychologists in the mid 1980s, but whose relevance is far broader than this: existential hermeneutics, post-structuralism and pragmatically oriented ordinary language philosophy. Let me offer three simplified snap-shots:

- *Existential hermeneutics.* Heidegger's (1978; 1982; 1990) insistence on the discursively mediated worldly dwelling of human existence marked a significant turn from Husserlian (1973; 1982) phenomenology to existential hermeneutics. Existential hermeneutics (which had roots in German romantic idealism and a longer tradition of Biblical exegesis) comes to understand Being in relation to a certain 'textuality of Being' (Stenner, Eccleston, 1992, Curt, 1994) that requires not just 'interpretation' but an interpretation of what is already an interpretation. In other words, before engaging in secondary interpretations, philosophers (and the social scientists influenced by them) must recognise that human existence is always-already self-narrated and self-interpreted existence. The 'authenticity' of such interpretations becomes a key theme, since our self-narrations are appropriated and negotiated in the context of inherited modes for the understanding of being. Key figures here include Heidegger (1990), Gadamer (1993) and Ricoeur (1988).
- *Post-structuralism.* This tradition gives equal importance to textuality but, as a largely post WW2 phenomenon, stresses the paradoxes and impossibilities of interpretation and its

interminable entwinement in operations of power. The equivalent to the Heideggerian 'turn' of existential hermeneutics is the turn from the 'structuralism' represented by, for example, Levi-Strauss's structural anthropology (1983) or de-Saussure's structural linguistics (1993), to the so-called 'post-structuralism' of writers such as Lyotard (1984), Derrida (1978) and Foucault (1977). Lyotard's book on the postmodern condition of knowledge, for instance, talks of the dwindling plausibility of the 'grand-narratives' (e.g. ideas of progress, of revolution, of scientific truth, etc.) that previously animated 'modern' intellectual life. The aim of this second strand is to tear down taken-for-granted monuments of would-be-truth and to reveal them as power-soaked historical constructions mediated by communication.

- *Ordinary language philosophy.* The third strand, although having roots in pragmatism, can be marked by Wittgenstein's own 'turn' from his major work the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921 / 1981) to his later *Philosophical Investigations* (1958). The first work was a universalising attempt to solve all of the problems of philosophy by specifying the logic of language and delimiting its proper domains (with an emphasis on rule-following as made explicit in adequate forms of *scientific* language). Although this work was hailed as groundbreaking by the logical positivists of the Vienna circle, Wittgenstein himself turned against it, envisaging his less technical and more aphoristic work *Philosophical Investigations* as a means of *curing* the kind of disease represented by his earlier work and the universalising tradition it supported. Wittgenstein thus puts *ordinary* language at centre stage in contrast to the (and his) previous celebration of *scientific* language as the bitter medicine for muddled thinking. The 'ordinary language' tradition proper includes figures such as Austin (1962) and Ryle (1975). An emphasis is put on the *performative* aspects of linguistic communication, and such work is presented as a kind of 'therapy' for illusory philosophical problems, obstacles and divisions that arise from a flawed understanding of language.

It should go without saying that these strands of philosophy, despite being roughly identifiable with German, French and the UK / US traditions respectively, are not to be considered as independent. Lyotard, for instance, drew heavily upon Wittgenstein's notion of language games, and both Foucault and Derrida acknowledged large debts to Heidegger. What is notable, however, is that each strand defines itself against an idea of *metaphysics*. As a result of this refusal of metaphysics, each strand, in its own way, deconstructs 'truth' as the possibility of an ultimate access to 'reality' and replaces it with the idea of a multiplicity of polyvalent versions, perspectives, language games, meanings, narratives, discourses, etc., each firmly located in its worldly nexus of space and time. Each strand then makes *discourse* its central concern and uses this focus to 'dethrone' previously held metaphysical ambitions to general truth and to replace them with concern for the local vicissitudes of communicatively mediated activity. For example, against Husserl's (1973; 1982) universalist ambitions for transcendental phenomenology as a 'psychology in the highest sense'—i.e. as *the* fundamental science, Heidegger famously posited the end of metaphysics in the philosophical context of a groundedness in being-in-the-world (cf. Heidegger, 1978). Similarly, against the structuralist dream of finally tracking down scientifically definable universals of the human condition, post-structuralism announces the death of the author, the impossibility of decision, the mythical nature of origins and the historical and cultural contingency of all forms of subjectivity. And finally, against the claim to have solved all of the major problems of philosophy via an understanding of the true logic of language, ordinary language philosophy retreats to a treatment of inevitably local and partial language games: oceans of metaphysics, suggested Wittgenstein, should be condensed into drops of grammar.

It is difficult to over-emphasise the influence of these prominent twentieth century developments in philosophy on contemporary social theory, social science and social psychology. Equally, however, these philosophical and theoretical developments ought not to be entirely abstracted from their societal context. Much could be said about this, but for present purposes it is sufficient to note that the 1980s was also a period during which many of these themes were cohering also under the epochal label of 'postmodernism'. Further, the notion of postmodernism gathered together, not just epistemological issues, but also, in complex and contested ways, the personal / political concerns of movements such as feminism, the disabled people's movement, post-colonialism, anti-psychiatry, and so forth. We called this gathering ferment of influences the 'climate of problematization' (Curt, 1994) or the 'climate of perturbation' (Stainton Rogers et al., 1995). Natural science itself was not immune to deconstruction in this climate, Kuhn's work having received a warm reception which particularly welcomed and emphasized its more relativistic conclusions (Stenner, 2005?). The climate was thus particularly conducive to making some of the rather dramatic claims about a complete 'paradigm shift' within social psychology (which I focus on only because it is my home territory) from a natural science model to a model with roots in the notions of discourse and social construction. Some of these claims were predominantly knowledge oriented, some predominantly political, and some a combination of both. With respect to the early proposals for new paradigms, some (e.g. Harré 1983; Shotter 1994) drew inspiration from the ordinary language strand of influence. Others (e.g. Gergen, 1985) were more directly influenced by the German hermeneutic strand, and others still (e.g. Henriques et al. 1984; Rose 1985) drew upon French post-structuralism and Althussarian Marxism.

Of course these philosophies must inevitably undergo a transformation if they are to enter into special sciences such as psychology and the social sciences. Such sciences tend not to value ideas for their own sake, but for their practical application as instruments for research in some specialised domain. The three strands of philosophy have thus born scientific fruit in the form of an explosion of interest in qualitative methods capable of managing the new centrality afforded to themes such as meaning, subjectivity, narrative and discourse. Methods such as discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) stand in explicit contrast to conventional 'positivistic' techniques of measurement and experimentation designed to separate timeless 'fact' from the local and historical vagaries of 'fiction' and mere supposition. Such methods are also presented in contrast to a residual metaphysics discerned in the 'speculative' and 'non-empirical' aspects of the philosophies that spawned them (ordinary language philosophy plays this role for Potter and Wetherell 1987), but their origins are clearly present in a continued preoccupation with philosophy and general-level theorisation. Enthusiasts for constructionist inspired qualitative methods thus routinely insist that broader 'ontological and epistemological' issues are at stake in their techniques. Specifically, the issues at stake are those inherited from the three philosophical traditions: the dethroning of metaphysics (which takes the form of the critique of positivism and any other general vantage point), and the enthroning of language as the source of meaning and the being of reality.

Questioning Dogma

In my own recent work in psychosocial studies I, like many others, have been trying to go beyond the dichotomy between mechanistic positivism and interpretational social constructionism (Brown and Stenner, *in press*). Social constructionism was certainly a radical approach in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In the first decade of the twenty

first century, by contrast, it has arguably become rather mainstream. What started off as a battle against dogmatism (the struggle to open up new possibilities in the face of hegemonic orderings of reality) risks fast becoming the guise in which dogmatism appears today. Many undergraduate social science students in the UK are now expected to 'choose' their preferred ontology (constructionist or positivist?) before embarking upon a final year empirical project. There appears to be an expectation that they will use 'qualitative' methods if constructionist, and 'quantitative' methods if positivist. What in the 1980s were torturous complexities that demanded, or so it seemed to me at least, huge efforts of intellect and will, are today often presented as if they were equivalent to choosing a horror or a comedy DVD from a supermarket shelf. These choices are well resourced by numerous textbooks and it is largely taken for granted that, as with any consumer choice, there is no correct answer. There is no felt contradiction between a view which holds that ultimately 'discourse is reality' and a view which strives for brute descriptions of empirical facts, for example. It is as if a complacent valuing of difference had smothered the critical desire for consistency and justice that once motivated it.

More worrying still is that a case could also be made that a banal form of social constructionist knowledge has become a key vehicle of social power in neo-liberal regimes which stress the right of each individual to construct their own reality and to live (with dwindling state funded institutions) according to their choices. Identifying multiple viewpoints to target products to distinct consumer groups is now the routine business of advertising agencies and political campaigners, and is no longer simply a matter of giving voice to the disenfranchised. Arguments for local cultural diversity are not the sole preserve of progressive radicals but are also used to deny mass violations of human rights and to promote the public humiliation of criminals. Meanwhile, the positivistic approach to psychology has moved from strength to strength, apparently entirely oblivious to decades of constructionist critique. The current intellectual and political climate is arguably less a climate of perturbation than a *climate of paralysis* (Brown, Stenner 2009). In this context it is surely wise not to celebrate the social constructionist turn in a complacent way. One must salvage what is valuable, jettison what is not, and move on.

Despite support from much that was interesting in twentieth century philosophy, this postmodern, social constructionist, discursive turn has also run up against some of the serious intellectual problems hinted at in the first part of this paper. The *prioritising of discourse* has led to a range of more debates over the social and psychological role of the body, affect and the theorisation of the extra-discursive more generally. The term 'discourse' is often used in a massively over-extended way that lacks empirical precision. More importantly, the assumption that discourse is both the source of meaning and the site at which meaning is at stake reproduces on a vast scale the gesture of what Whitehead called the *bifurcation of nature* into a realm of meaningless and objective causality, on the one hand, and a human socio-cultural realm of meaning on the other. In practice, this has meant that social constructionist psychologists have distanced themselves from natural science, and have taken refuge in the assumption that the concept of nature can only be a social construction to be put to use in discourse. In short, the prioritising of discourse entails a paradoxical commitment to a thoroughly dualistic *metaphysics* that, given the antagonism to metaphysics, goes largely unrecognised as such.

Potentiality [Mediation] Actuality

In this last section I wish to suggest, somewhat tentatively, a re-engagement with metaphysics, and I wish to take up Harré's hint about the relevance of the general concepts

of possibility (or potentiality) and actuality. If we define metaphysics as the task of generalising beyond any special science to provide an interpretative system capable of expressing their interconnection, then it should be clear that a core problem with the received social constructionism / positivism distinction is that it bifurcates nature and discourages the expression of interconnections between the islands of matter and meaning. Another disadvantage is that it leaves the natural sciences with outmoded fundamental general concepts of matter, space, time and causality that have anyway been rendered implausible since the relativity and quantum revolutions, and it leaves the social sciences to take pride in ignoring their wider relationships with biological, chemical and physical systems. The natural world suffers from an image of it that is too static, determined and reactive, and the psychosocial world suffers from an image of it as an island of creativity, meaning and intentionality: "the only point in a pointless universe" (Stengers 2005).

To counter these problems, I suggest that social constructionism be situated in the broader context of a constructivist metaphysics that I have elsewhere called 'deep empiricism' (Stenner 2008). Social constructionism, which stresses the constructed and constructing nature of social reality, would thus be one special application of a constructivism which stresses the constructed and constructing nature of all existence, physical, chemical, biological, psychological and social. Although this framework can only be hinted at here (for a more developed account, see Brown and Stenner 2009; Stenner 2007), such a vision demands reengagement with the work of the last great metaphysicians, including Alfred North Whitehead, Henri Bergson and William James, who themselves inherited a long tradition dating back to Plato. These thinkers do not begin with a bifurcated ontology but with an assertion of unity and fundamental relatedness. Human beings are not separate from, but *part of* the wider universe, and metaphysics must articulate this general 'togetherness'. More specifically, the universe (ourselves included) is not to be conceived as a collection of discrete bits of matter connected only by external causal forces, but as a unity characterised by an essential relatedness.

It was Hume who demolished the concept of an essential relatedness to nature that featured in the accepted philosophy of his day. This demolition was a profound influence on subsequent philosophy. Both the British Empiricist tradition, and the German tradition inspired by Kant and Hegel can be read as attempts to restore some sense of the fundamental relatedness of things. The concept of relatedness demolished by Hume, however, was part of an accepted philosophy that inherited certain core philosophical notions that would be challenged by new forms of process oriented philosophy inspired by figures such as Bergson, James, Whitehead and, more recently, Deleuze and Stengers. Whitehead, for example, shows throughout his writing how Hume, the tradition he demolished, and the British and German traditions that struggled to reconstruct philosophy from its ruins, share a conception of fundamental fact as "a multiplicity of subjects qualified by predicates" (1922/2007, 13). All share the idea (also endorsed by Harré above) that, at base, the universe is composed of subjects (rocks, trees, gusts of wind, flows of fluid, electrons) which are implicitly conceived as substances (subjects) qualified by predicates (a hard rock, a brown tree). The problem with this assumption as to fundamental fact is that it begins with the supposition of a multiplicity of *disjoined* subjects. Any relatedness must then overcome this initial state of disjunction: conjunctive relations must be forged. An obvious example here is Leibniz's effort to overcome the disjoined nature of his monads with a principle of mirroring.

Deep empiricism follows Whitehead in replacing the fundamental notion of material substance with an ontology in which the irreducibles are *events*. Hence in *Science and the Modern World,* Whitehead states that "a theory of science which discards materialism must

answer the question as to the character of … primary entities. There can be only one answer on this basis. We must start with the event as the ultimate unit of natural occurrence… accordingly, a non-materialistic philosophy of nature will identify a primary organism as being the emergence of some particular pattern as grasped in the unity of an event" (1926 / 1985, 129-130). When 'stuff' is replaced with 'events', the universe is newly conceived as a spatial and temporal continuum of *occasions of actuality* (in his later work, Whitehead came to prefer the concept of the 'actual occasion' or 'actual entity' to that of 'event'). Relationality is central here, since the universe is a kind of 'theatre' for the interrelations of activities.

The concept of the actual occasion directly concerns the relationship between the possible and the actual. Each actual occasion—whether it be an occasion constituting an electron or an occasion constituting a human conversation—is a happening in which potentiality or 'the possible' is grasped into the form of some particular pattern, which pattern constitutes the *actualisation* of that potential. The actual occasion thus provides a basic general level concept that permits us to cross the divide between m-grammar and p-grammar. A molecular occasion, no less than the occasion of a personal emotion, involves 'data' whose potentiality is patterned in particular ways, giving rise to a new actuality. Certainly the scope for novelty is considerably less in the former (when dealing, say, with the dissolving of sugar in water) than the latter, but nevertheless, a certain continuity is discernable. Consider in this respect the following quotation from Bergson (1991, 159-160):

> Hydrochloric acid always acts in the same way upon carbonate of lime whether in the form of marble or of chalk yet we do not say that the acid perceives in the various species the characteristic features of the genus. Now there is no essential difference between the process by which this acid picks out from the salt its base and the act of the plant which invariably extracts from the most diverse soils those elements that serve to nourish it. Make one more step; imagine a rudimentary consciousness such as that of an amoeba in a drop of water: it will be sensible of the resemblance, and not of the difference, in the various organic substances which it can assimilate. In short, we can follow from the mineral to the plant, from the plant to the simplest conscious beings, from the animal to man [sic], the progress of the operation by which things and beings seize from their surroundings that which attracts them, that which interests them practically… simply because the rest of their surroundings takes no hold upon them: this similarity of reaction following actions superficially different is the germ which human consciousness develops into general ideas.

Following this way of thinking, and so long as we do not imply consciousness or high level perception, we would thus *not* be making a category mistake if we were to extend the concept of 'experience' to the activity of an acid picking out from the salt its base, or the process of sugar dissolving in water. Of all the possibilities available in its immediate environment, the plant selectively actualises those possibilities that serve to nourish it, and of all the possibilities immanent in a conversational setting, a given utterance actualises only a limited selection. It is this extension of the concept of experience via an event-centred metaphysics that forms the basis of *deep empiricism*. The conventional empiricism inaugurated by Hume famously treats all experience as originating from human sense perception and high-grade experience. Deep empiricism considers such experience as entailing rather rare and highly sophisticated actual occasions. Such experience in fact rests upon a vast and unacknowledged backdrop of more *affective* experiences and is in this sense merely the tip of an iceberg that extends deep into the totality of nature. Experience in this far broader 'deep empiricist' sense is literally the *actualisation of potential*. A similar position is developed by Giles Deleuze, who was

directly influenced by Bergson and Whitehead. In the 'What is an event?' chapter of his book on Leibniz, Deleuze uses explicitly Whiteheadian terms to describe this broad definition of experience as a "concrescence of elements". He follows Whitehead in referring not to 'perception' but to *prehension*. What is involved in experience is: 'a *prehension*… the eye is a prehension of light. Living beings prehend water, soil, carbon, and salts' (Deleuze 1993, 78). These prehensions "somehow anticipate psychic life".

One key merit of the potential / actual distinction is thus that it holds out the promise of providing a much needed bridging concept for integrating natural, social and psychological sciences. Another merit is that it provides a much-needed vantage point from which to challenge the kinds of dogmatism alluded to in the previous section on social constructionism. The potential always *transcends* the actual, since the actual is one specific concrete realisation of potential. Potentiality thus draws attention to the fact that things can be different—and perhaps even *better*—than the way they actually are, here and now. Arguably, this distinction is fundamental to the impulse of philosophy. To philosophise, for Plato, is to ascend from the cave of mere received opinion and convention and to gain a better practical insight into possible forms of order. Creativity and novelty are decisive here, along with eternity and transcendence. The ingredients of potentiality can be assembled in novel and creative ways: we are not destined to endlessly repeat the same. At its best, social constructionism is a critique of dogmatism in the name of a more productive and creative actualisation of potentiality: it is a refusal to accept received opinion and structure. At its worst it denies any vantage point beyond the mundane and conventional, and urges us to remain in our caves and to renounce false dreams of creativity and progress: the actual is all there is, it falsely implies, and it is completely determined by history.

In conclusion

> For the present we have only to conceive of three natures; first, that which is in process of generation; secondly, that in which the generation takes place; and thirdly, that of which the thing generated is a resemblance. And we may liken the receiving principle to a mother, and the source or spring to a father, and the intermediate nature to a child. Plato, Timaeus, (Triton genos, 48e4).

> The actualities constituting the process of the world are conceived as exemplifying the ingression (or 'participation') of other things which constitute the potentialities of definiteness for any actual existence. The things that are temporal arise by their participation in the things which are eternal. The two sets are mediated by a thing which combines the actuality of what is temporal with the timelessness of what is potential (Whitehead 1927-8/1985, 40).

> Point, line, space—nothing is clearer or more luminous. The point of singularity, the line of definition, the space where forces or fluxes move, are born, and move on (Serres 1991, 191).

Novelty and timelessness do not exist in a relation of mutual contradiction. If philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, then each footnote might nevertheless constitute the rebirth of a timelessly novel naivety. In the quotations above, Plato, Whitehead and Serres each propose three forms, types or classes of existence. Important differences notwithstanding, there is a good deal of correspondence between the three. Crudely put, Whitehead's actualities and Serres' singularities (or points) correspond to Plato's child in process of generation. These are the things that actually occur. Whitehead's pure potentialities and Serres' lines of definition resonate with Plato's father, the source of pattern. These are the things that exist always, but

never actually *are*. Whitehead's mediator and Serres' matrix of moving forces and fluxes evoke Plato's mother, the receptacle or receiving principle that transmits and converts potentiality to actuality. In these days of TLAs (three letter acronyms) in which it is doubtless politically incorrect to talk in this way of fathers, mothers and children, it might be wise to simplify all this into the post modern acronym of PMA: Potentiality—Mediation—Actuality (or, if preferred, Pattern—Matrix—Activity). I suggest that, through detailed engagement with a range of special sciences, a constructivist metaphysics will need to be worked up around such concepts.

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