THE CORE OF RADICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

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The key ideas of this post-epistemological approach to the questions what is knowledge and how do we come to have it, can be summarized as follows:

1. What we call “knowledge” does not and could not represent a world that is supposed to be beyond our experiential interface with it. In this, constructivism agrees with the sceptics. But, like pragmatism, constructivism introduces a modified concept of knowledge. Knowledge pertains to the way in which we organize the world of our experience.

2. Radical constructivism does not deny an ulterior reality; it follows Vico in that it denies that human rational knowledge can attain a God-made world or produce anything that could rightly be called a representation of it.

3. It agrees with Berkeley that it is unintelligible to attribute existence to anything that cannot or could not at some time be perceived, because, as he said, “there is no rational evidence for the existence of an independent reality.”

4. It takes from Vico the basic idea that human knowledge is a human construction, an idea which Piaget – who, I believe, did not know the Neapolitan philosopher – developed very much further by minutely mapping the constructive conceptual operations by means of which human subjects furnish their experiential worlds.

5. Constructivism drops the requirement that knowledge be “true” in the sense that it matches an objective reality. All it requires of knowledge is that it be viable, in that it fits into the world of the knower’s experience.

6. Inherent in radical constructivism is the realization that no knowledge can claim uniqueness. In other words, no matter how viable the solution to a problem might be, it can never be regarded as the only possible solution.

7. This last consideration, together with Leo Apostel’s admonition that “a system should always be applied to itself,” leads to the conclusion that radical constructivism cannot claim to be anything but one approach to the age-old problem of knowing. Only its application in contexts where a theory of knowing makes a difference can show whether or not it is a viable approach.

Notes