Urban Kordeš
Johef Stefan Institut, Ljubljana, Slovenija

FROM TRUTH TO TRUST

Introduction

It is becoming more and more obvious that the future (of science) is not in the discovery of a "world equation" which would explain everything – to everyone. On the contrary, it seems that future will be marked by the redirection of attention from searching for objective truths to becoming aware of the individual's (observer's) interaction with the observed and the individual's attitude towards the world emerging from this awareness. Involvement of the observer would no longer be a thing shunned by scientists, rather, it will itself become the main subject of research. This shift of focus is called by Heinz von Foerster *the participatory position*. In the paper I will try to explain why a "position" and not "insight" or "theory". The system of thought derived from this position will be named *a constructivism* (again according to von Foerster). The principle question considered is: What would philosophy look like, if we took in consideration the participatory epistemological position. While trying to answer this question, I keep bumping into the unsurpassable boundaries dividing different systems of thought. Thus, one cannot expect the answers to be universally valid and I try to keep this in mind at all times. Nevertheless, I believe that von Foerster's step from *objectivity* to *responsibility* and from *analytical clarity* to *trust* (perhaps) reaches beyond the epistemological barriers and speaks also to those on "the other side of the epistemological abyss".

The hermeneutic approach

If we accept the concept of an objective world outside ourselves, we could also consent to the idea of language being a way of indicating external objects, and then we can afford to make definitions, labels. But from the point of view of the constructivist concept of the subject as a co-creator of (his or her own) world, precise definitions can sometimes even be harmful. Many times they deceive us into the illusion that we

have "grasped" some notion and thus comprehended it. Clear definitions also imply that everyone *must* be able to understand the subject of discourse. Rigid definitions bring along the tacit presupposition that there is something like an "out there". Many examples can be found (especially in analytical philosophy) where clear, logically consistent sentences filled with precisely defined notions lead to utter nonsense and mostly to never-ending scholastic debates, hinting at the fact that analytical clarity is not so "clear" to everybody. If we insist on the conclusion that the observer always participates in what he or she observes, all statements (being statements made by observers) are *self-referrential* and potentially paradoxical. It gets worse: not just statements concerning cognition, but also all other statements have no more firm ground than the objects of the epistemological debate. The only difference being that with other statements this is less obvious.

The hermeneutic approach characteristic for constructivism allows for a spiral approach to consent (in a dialogue) or operative (dispositional) knowledge (in reading). This last notion implies the situation when we are perhaps unable to construct a complete definition of a given notion, but we are able to handle it, use it in a meaningful way (i.e. capability of action).

According to Rorty, there is such strong consent concerning a certain part of our world that we can take it as objective and thus can afford to be "epistemological" in that area. But outside of it we must act "hermeneutically". We can afford to act epistemologically in the areas where we understend completely what is going on (i.e. where we already agreed upon a practice of discourse), while we must act hermeneutically where we do not understand what is going on and are sincere enoug to admit that to ourselves. (Rorty, 1991)

Rorty says that the difference between the "hermeneutic" and the "epistemological" discourse is that the hermeneutic one does not ascribe the possibility of reaching consent to the existence of a common underlying ground or matrix, but to the discussion itself – until the discussion goes on, there is hope that the participants will somehow reach consent.

Rorty's turn to hermeneutics could also be interpreted as a passage

from attempting to reach (ultimate) knowledge to *attempting* to gain knowledge. The imperfective aspect of this verb expresses the view of cognition as an *open* process, the goal of which is not to find "an objective truth", but the capacity for (successful) action or communication.

Philosophy as testifying

As already mentioned, most philosophical strains share a common feature: all of them strive to "get to the bottom of things". It appears that all of them are based on an unconscious epistemological model, tacitly suggesting to the philosopher that there exists an objective truth acceptable to all – and that it is his or her destiny to finally expose it. This is superbly described in the introduction to the book *The Linguistic Turn*, edited by Rorty (1962/1992, 1). Let me present a somewhat longer quote to illustrate that:

> *The history of philosophy is punctuated by revolts against the practices of previous philosophers and by attempts to transform philosophy into a science – a discipline in which universally recognized decision-procedures are available for testing philosophical theses. In Descartes, in Kant, in Hegel, in Husserl, in Wittgenstein's **Tractatus**, and again in Wittgenstein's **Philosophical Investigations**, one finds the same disgust at the spectacle of philosophers quarreling endlessly over the same issues. The proposed remedy for this situation typically consists in adopting a new method: for example, the method of "clear and distinct ideas" outlined in Descartes' **Regulae**, Kant's "transcendental method," Husserl's "bracketing," the early Wittgenstain's attempt to exhibit the meaninglessness of traditional philosophical theses by due attention to logical form, and the later Wittgenstein's attempt to exhibit the pointlessness of these theses by diagnosing the causes of their having been propounded. In all of these revolts, the aim of the revolutionary is to replace opinion with knowledge, and to propose as the proper meaning of "philosophy" the accomplishment of some finite task by applying a certain set of methodological directions.*

In the past, every such revolution has failed, and always for the same reason. The revolutionaries were found to have presupposed, both in the criticism of their predecessors and in their directives for the future, the truth of certain substantive and controversial philosophical theses. The new method which each proposed was one which, in good conscience, could be adopted only by those who subscribed to those

theses. Every philosophical rebel has tried to be "presuppositionless," but none has succeeded. This is not surprising, for it would indeed be hard to know what methods a philosopher ought to follow without knowing something about the nature of the philosopher's subject matter, and about the nature of human knowledge. to know what method to adopt, one must already have arrived at some metaphysical and some epistemological conclusions."

The never-ending philosophical striving described by Rorty reminds me of cases mentioned in the work of the family therapists Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974). In the analysis of numerous cases of psychological problems of individuals and whole families, the mentioned therapists discovered that most of their clients approach their problems in ways that are not merely ineffective in reducing their problems, but actually make things worse. The most common form of such approaches is called "more of the same". It is a characteristic of this "strategy" that the involved try to solve their problems by repeating one and the same kind of solution. For example, a couple where the wife is trying to solve the problem of her husband not talking to her by asking him more and more questions, while the husband is trying to solve the problem of his wife "cross-interrogating him all the time" by talking less and less. The continuous endeavor to solve the problem is thus actually what mantains it. Even worse – the more they try to solve it, the more persistent the conflict.

The hopeless, incessant insistence of philosophers on "more of the same" has been the pain in the neck of many naturalist scientists used to pragmatically and expeditiously solving "concrete" (and of course trivial) problems. This presented a problem also to many philosophers, who passed into other disciplines because of that, like Piaget, for example, or tried to modify philosophy into a more practical and functional thing. Constructivists could be said to belong to this last group, at least in part.

It is contestable whether such "renovated" philosophy, capable of handling certain issues in more pragmatic ways, could still be called philosophy at all. I, personally, do not think so. During the last two thousand years, philosophy became identified with its strategy of "more of the same", namely by trying to get to the bottom of irrational things by

rational means. "True" philosophers do not try to change this method at all. This constant reformulating of the same questions, this incessant "internal dialogue" denigrates philosophy, but at the same time keeps it going. We are dealing here with the very same pattern of organization as we can observe in the research of the organization of living beings – constant search is the necessary condition for survival. Ultimate answers would be the end of philosophy itself.

What about constructivists? I will give my answer in the first person singular, even though I believe that most of constructivist thinkers would agree with the following lines: I believe that the pluralism suggested by philosophy has potentials that are lacking in exact sciences. To a constructivist, the plurality of diverse, but coexisting philosophies, suggests a plurality of diverse, but coexisting worlds. The fact that all of these worlds exist simultaneously is good news, showing us that we can coexist, regardless of our "truth".

I think that philosophers ought to give up the (platonic) idea that they are the ones who separate the "grain from the weeds", the truth from the untruth. This position has lately been ascribed mainly to analytical philosophers. Their never-ending, analytically polished debates show that the human brain is capable of constructing and also prove virtually anything (consider, for example, McTaggard's study about the non-existence of time and the innumerable futile attempts to dismiss it that have accumulated in the course of nearly a hundred years). In my opinion, the philosophers' message should be: "Let the grain and the weeds grow and then we will see which is which." Today it is much more necessary to accept such a viewpoint than to keep the rigid distinctions between truth and untruth. Mere thinking is a very bad assistance in deciding about the matters of vital importance. If we do not realize that soon, our very existence might be at stake.

Any philosophy makes sense, as long as it is existentially liable for its author

Constructivists do not attempt to step out of the circle of the never-ending search for truth. It is not our aim to trigger a new revolution (at least I hope so!) or to show that we are right, while everybody else is wrong. How could that be, if we keep in mind von Foerster's conception

of truth? (Von Foerster, similarly as Nietzsche, considered truth to be mostly a means of power.)

On the other hand, one cannot deny that constructivists are also motivated by the desire to discover the ultimate and universally valid (one could also say – true!) model of the world. That is the force that makes us endure in searching and thinking, just like everybody else. But perhaps the difference between us and other philosophers is that we are aware of the "privacy", and most of all the transitoriness of our truth. Once we find truth, we do not attempt to place it on the altar of eternity.

Any philosophical theory is (or was) important to its maker. (If it is not so, if a theory is just an existentially *non*-liable wordplay – than it is not worth discussing at all.) To a constructivist, philosophy is something like a *testimony* (one might even say confession) – a personal account of the search for truth, sense or essence. This is why most of the philosophical disputes appear to me to be a waste of time and energy. From the point of view of a realistic epistemological position, based on the assumption that statements have a speaker-independent meaning, corresponding or not corresponding to objective facts, such disputes, of course, make perfect sense. But being a counstructivist, I cannot agree with this position. A testimony of each individual is the best we can expect from him or her, thus it is imperative to see philosophy *first* as a personal declaration and only then undertake comparisons and criticism. My standpoint is best described by the story von Foerster presented in his paper *Ethics and Second-Order Cybernetics* (1995, 7):

"I have a dear friend who grew up in Marrakech. The house of his family stood on the street that divides the Jewish and the Arabic quarter. As a boy he played with all the others, listened to what they thought and said, and learned of their fundamentally different views. When I asked him once, "Who was right?" he said, "They are both right."

"But this cannot be," I argued from an Aristotelian platform, "Only one of them can have the truth!"

"The problem is not truth," he answered, "The problem is trust."

Once trust is reached, adjusting, which is the essential component of the process of communication, as I have emphasized many times before, can begin. In philosophical discussions, it is most important to adjust epistemological assumptions. Once that is accomplished, we can turn from the "hermeneutic" to the "epistemological" position (according to Rorty). But to accomplish that we need dialogic activity that calls for awareness about there being two (or more) involved in the dialogue. We cannot address "everyone" from "nowhere". We must first make sure that our epistemological assumptions are in line, only than can we start exploring the network of meanings woven around these assumptions. (the major question being, how can we be sure when we have reached this point?).

Heinz von Foerster would say that the "epistemological" assumptions that I am talking about are undecidable questions, the answers to which we are free to choose. The construction of the entire system of thought depends on the (conscious or unconscious) choice of the answer to the basic starting point. What is true and what untrue in our world depends on the answer to the undecidable questions (in our case the question is the choice of the epistemological position).

Everything I wrote is my testimony that makes sense only from the constructivistic epistemological position (if it makes any sense at all). constructivists *choose* following answer to a basic epistemological dilemma:

I am a *part* of the universe. When I act (acting includes cognizing), I change myself and the universe.

REFERENCES

von Foerster H., 1995, *Etics and second order cybernetics*, Stanford Humanities Review. Vol. 2. Stanford.

Rorty R., 1991, Philosophical papers. Essays on Heidegger and others. Vol. 2. Cambridge

Rorty R., 1992, The linguistic turn. Chicago.

Winograd T., F.Flores, 1986, Understanding Computers and Cognition. Norwood.