Taking Social Constructionism Seriously

Gergen, K. J. (1999). **An Invitation to Social Construction**. London: Sage (248 p.)

Gergen, K.J. (2001). **Social Construction in Context**. London: Sage (223 p.)

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I

Social constructionism (SC) has emerged as a significant paradigm in psychology and other social sciences during the last twenty years or so. Kenneth Gergen can be considered a founding father and currently one of the leading exponents of SC as theory and practice. Gergen wrote about the social construction of self-knowledge as early as 1977 (Gergen, 1977), and in 1985 SC was already a "movement" as witnessed in Gergen's often cited "The social constructionist movement in modern psychology" (1985) published in *American Psychologist*. SC has developed from a heretic partisan theory to a widely recognised paradigm, and it must be considered one of the most interesting frameworks in contemporary psychology. For example, the renowned journal *Theory and Psychology* devotes two whole issues to SC in 2001 and 2002, "Social Constructionism and Its Critics" (June 2001) and the forthcoming "Varieties of Social Constructionism" (October 2002).

Kenneth Gergen is a prolific writer, who has published in many different areas within psychology and related fields. His major works are *The Saturated Self* (1991) and *Realities and Relationships* (1994). His two new books *An Invitation to Social Construction* (ISC) and *Social Construction in Context* (SCC) continue the line of thought that was developed in earlier works, and while these new books contain few new perspectives, they seek to clarify the basic tenets of SC, while at the same time providing more concrete and practical illustrations of SC's theoretical points. Gergen emphasises that SC both functions as a metatheory (by challenging all first philosophies of knowledge), as social theory (by investigating the concrete generation of knowledge in different domains) and as societal practice (e.g. in therapeutic, educational and organizational practices). Both books contain thorough discussions of the basic framework of SC including discussions of the dichotomy between interior knowledge and the exterior world (a dichotomy Gergen seeks to dissolve), the communal nature of meaning and language, postmodernism, and the inherent self-reflexivity in social constructionist inquiry. Gergen is aware that if the real and the good are socially constructed, then SC itself is a social construction and can be subjected to critical analysis. Of the two books, *An Invitation to Social Construction* is slightly more philosophical and groundwork oriented, while *Social Construction in Context* contains more practical analyses. Four chapters are here devoted to social constructions in societal practices; in therapy, pedagogy and the organizational world.

When reading Gergen, one is pressed to consider the question "Do I like him?" We probably always answer this question, more or less explicitly, when reading some author, but in Gergen's case the question seems particularly important because of the nature and style of his writing. He practices what he preaches. One is continually encouraged to "go on" with him in a dialogue. He is always intent to avoid binary dichotomies, and he does not see his adversaries as being plainly wrong, but as viewing the world from a different perspective. His discussions do not bear the mark of totalising arguments, but are rather like invitations to dance (Gergen's favourite metaphor). Personally, I do like Gergen. I like the comprehensive and tolerant style of his writing, and. I like his academic honesty, the constant self-criticism and reflexivity that seeks to do to SC what SC does to all claims to universal and foundational knowledge: showing that nothing is true because it represents the world - rather, our language, theories and meanings are all cultural constructions that are what they are in virtue of the use we give them. SC is here close to pragmatism's claim that meaning and truth are grounded in what is useful in performing actions.

SC is even closer, however, to Wittgenstein's philosophy, according to which meaning and truth are neither constituted by mirroring the objective world as modernist accounts presuppose, nor by being use*ful* as pragmatists claim, but simply through use as such. According to Wittgenstein, nothing *grounds* our cultural meanings, not even pragmatical utility. In many ways, Wittgenstein's philosophy functions as the philosophical background to SC, but I think there is a danger here. The danger consists in what is sometimes a rather loose and selective reading of Wittgenstein. Gergen repeatedly stresses what he takes to be the basic Wittgensteinian *dictum*, that meaning is use, but he (and many other commentators) overlooks the fact that what Wittgenstein actually said was: "For a *large* class of cases - though not for all - in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language game" (1958: #43). Wittgenstein wanted to demonstrate that *any* general theory of meaning is impossible, but Gergen apparently takes Wittgenstein to have one specific theory of meaning, viz. the theory that meaning is always accounted for as use in public practices. All this might seem like an unnecessary quibble, but in fact the idea that linguistic meaning is always use is the cornerstone of the whole social constructionist framework. So if Wittgenstein was right that meaning is *sometimes* accounted for by studying how concepts are used, *and sometimes in other ways* (even if Wittgenstein does not describe how), then SC cannot be the whole story about meaning. This is an example of how SC accidentally becomes what it seeks to avoid: a totalising theory of some phenomena, here meaning. I might add that another philosophical icon of SC, Martin Heidegger, who, in line with Wittgenstein, has contributed to the post-subjectivist perspective in the social sciences, can be read as defending a currently unfashionable correspondence theory of truth, which is antithetical to SC (cf. Dreyfus 2001). More on this below.

Gergen's loose reading of Wittgenstein should not make us dismiss his positive recommendations. Especially his *poetic activism* is inspiring. He emphasises that by generating new forms of language, we invite alternative futures. Gergen believes that "psychology can play a far more vital role within society than heretofore" (SCC: 43). Psychologists just have to appreciate the fact that psychological theories and practices are able to generate new meanings, new practices

and new worlds. Such a vision of psychology should, however, go hand in hand with an augmented sense of moral and political responsibility. If psychologists are able to change the world by way of poetic activism and generative theory, they can no longer pretend to be value-neutral mapmakers of an objective reality, and Gergen is refreshingly clear on this.

Readers who liked Gergen's earlier books will also like the new ones. Readers who do not share Gergen's social constructionist beliefs will also, nonetheless, be able to profit from his analyses of a range of cultural phenomena. His explorations of the relational self, media, power, technology, therapy and education are informing and worthwhile. The chapter "Who Speaks and Who Responds in the Human Sciences?" in SCC is downright entertaining in its analyses of the different genres of social research. Gergen here locates a mystical, a prophetic, a mythic and a civil tradition in the social sciences, and such analyses are an example of Gergen's finest achievement: concrete penetrating analyses. However, especially ISC would have profited from a more careful proofreading. There are a number of unnecessary errors including misspelling of a number of names and book titles, and there are too many repetitions. SCC is slightly better in this regard, even though this book also contains too many errors; e.g. the Danish woman, Marianne Egelund, is referred to as a Swedish man. Furthermore, the main principles of SC, and also the modernism-postmodernism debates, are unnecessarily repeated in almost all chapters. Still, both books are highly recommendable, even though I would be satisfied with reading just one of them, because of the significant overlap between them.

II

In the remainder of this review I shall be concerned with some more general thoughts I have had about SC for some time. I wish to invite other readers, both advocates and sceptics of SC, to help me discuss and answer these questions, if possible. I hope to move beyond the usual repetitive criticisms of SC relating to moral and epistemological relativism, and instead raise some more paradigm-internal questions. I am aware that I can only scratch the surface here due to the complexity of the issues, but I hope to indicate where to locate some possible problems in SC. The questions can be formulated as follows:

1. What motivates social constructionism?
2. What normative force can social constructionist discourse have, if normativity and the good are human constructions? In other words: Is it a human possibility to claim that the good is a construction, yet still embrace it and live by it?
3. What happens if we take social constructionism seriously and apply it as a form of life, as Gergen proposes?

My own tentative answer to the question of what *I* think motivates SC will point to its anti-scientism and maybe a more general anti-reductionism. But do we have to be constructionists in order to avoid scientism? I think that SC is motivated by a concern with the growing importance of scientific and technological understanding that pervades our culture (see ISC: chapters 1 and 2). Gergen is not happy with the fact that scientific discourse has gained hegemony in many areas of our culture. Many people today believe that science has a privileged access to

reality, and believe for that reason that scientific explanations are somehow "more true" than all other kinds of description and explanation (aesthetic, moral, political, everyday). I agree with SC's idea that other, non-scientific, forms of practice carry other kinds of knowledge and truth, but I am sceptical about the conclusions that can be drawn from this. Gergen draws the conclusion that reality is socially constructed, and that science, art and morality are all on a par; these discourses are all performative, i.e. akin to a dance, and they do not represent the world anymore than the movements of a dance do. Indeed, "[t]he terms by which we understand our world and our self are neither required nor demanded by "what there is"" (ISC:47). Instead, all description is poetic and rhetorical, and we can never really refer to anything outside our language.

As I argued above, I think we should be careful when we address the question of how language works. Philosophers used to think that language works by representing reality (and most psychologists still think so), but as Wittgenstein demonstrated, this is a mistaken idea. However, I think it is of little value merely to substitute one grand theory of language with another. Gergen seems implicitly to cling to the pre-Wittgensteinian idea that language and meaning work in one way only; in Gergen's case he sees language as essentially performative. I believe that a more accurate view of language would be one that did not attempt to find the universal "mechanism of meaning", but rather examined the concrete and heterogeneous linguistic practices of humans. And here one might find that some parts of our language actually do work by pointing to (or corresponding to) entities outside our language, or in Hubert Dreyfus' words: "we have *practices for making sense of entities as independent of those very practices*" (2001:154). In my opinion, we should give up the idea that all language works in one way only, be it by mirroring reality or as poetic performance. A viable alternative to SC, which preserved its anti-scientistic thrust, could then be some kind of "unproblematic realism" (Taylor, 2000), viz. a realism that acknowledged the existence of "everyday" entities and happenings in the meaningful human life-world, and which thereby served as a corrective to any scientistic reductionism. My critical question to SC is if an unproblematic realism is not as good as the counter-intuitive claim that the world is a *construction*?

This leads me to my second question. What interests me about SC is not primarily its claim that reality is socially constructed. I agree with philosopher Ian Hacking who says: "I do not find it [...] thrilling to read about the social construction of events that could only occur historically, only in the context of a society" (1995:67). On an "ontological" level, it is not very informing to say that the concept of crime, for example, is a social construct. What I find thrilling in SC is rather its activism. It is its focus on change, re-interpretation, its call for ethical and political action and its belief in the power of humans to change their lives and worlds. But while its activism in my view is the most attractive feature of SC, it is also quite problematic. The problem comes to light when SC simultaneously claims the following two things: (1) All action is ethical and political and (2) Ethics and politics are social constructions. My question, then, is: can we believe in and care for the good, if we have realised that it is a contingent social construction? Do *constructions* have normative force? Can we at one and the same time perceive our way of life as arbitrary, and still see it as something we ought to embrace? Richard Rorty (1989) is a prominent exponent of the idea that we can, and ought to, do so. He praises those

liberal ironists, who know that there is no rationality involved in choosing between different "final vocabularies", i.e. different ways of making sense of our world and ourselves. Gergen seems to endorse a similar view. However, he is aware of its difficulties: "If I say "I love my children," it is very difficult to suspend this reality and examine it as "only one and possibly problematic way of putting things."" (ISC:62). Of course! And the reason why could be that it is not just "one and possibly problematic way of putting things", but indeed the truest and most adequate description of Gergen's relation to his children. To say this is not an option for Gergen, however, because in his view language *never* depicts reality; language is always understood as performative acts.

Given that SC advocates an activism, then my question is: Does it make sense to be an activist if one already knows that what we take to be good and worth fighting for is merely an interpretation or construction? On a phenomenological level, it is also quite surprising (and perhaps bad moral phenomenology) to learn from Gergen that I *construct* the good in collaboration with others. When did I/we ever *construct* the good? I doubt that this is how we experience our moral reality. And anyway, if we grant that we do construct the good, then where do we find the reasons to advocate one life form, one kind of construction, over another? This sort of criticism is particularly raised against SC from the margins, from feminists, gay people, ethnic minorities and so on. Often these people wish to affirm the reality of power relations and oppression. People at the margins are sometimes afraid that SC can be used to deny these realities. As an American politician once said (I quote from memory, and I might even have seen the quote in one of Gergen's books): "The racial problem in the US will disappear if we just stop talking about it as a problem". Such statements are chillingly close to constructionist slogans claiming that we can change patterns of action simply by altering our discourses (ISC:115). Even if Gergen addresses this issue (see SCC: ch. 10), I do not think he provides an adequate answer, but I invite other people to respond if they disagree.

Finally, my third question springs from a wish to take SC seriously. Gergen wants SC to be validated, not by examining how well it corresponds to reality, but by seeing how much it enriches our practices and our lives: "[C]onstructionism is more like an invitation to a dance […]. The most pressing question is, what happens to us when we begin to employ constructionist ideas? How is our life changed, for better or worse?" (SCC:228-9). What happens if we really become social constructionists, not just in theory, but also in our daily, practical lives? We can conduct a thought experiment in order to find out, but in a way this experiment is already being lived. The large number of people experimenting with their identities today, especially on the internet, but also in friendships, self-development practices, sexual and love relationships, in flexible working life and so on, incarnate Gergen's ideal relational self without an inner core. Michael Zimmerman (2000) has analysed Gergen's vision of the relational, decentred, "saturated" self, and has argued that the "identity-morphing" it advocates is really an attempt to refuse to face up to human finitude and mortality. Postmodern humanity has thus, in Zimmerman's view, been reduced to "flexible standing reserve, without enduring essence or identity" (ibid:127). Zimmerman wants to stress the point that contrary to what Gergen thinks, being human is related to a basic finitude or what Heidegger called *facticity*. We cannot be everything, we must commit ourselves to certain things, and such commitment sometimes rules out

other possibilities. The postmodern "morpher", in contrast, by living in the moment and always relating flexibly to people and situations, does "presumably experience a kind of ersatz immortality" (ibid:134). Furthermore, does trustworthy moral judgment not require some integrity, truthfulness, and some personal continuity across time and space? And if it does, will SC not make it difficult for us to be moral beings if we incorporate it into our lives and practices?

Plato sensed that complete freedom incarnated in flexible and versatile relationships is not without its problems. The following description of man in a democratic society is from Plato's *The Republic* written circa 360 BC, but it could have been of a flexible postmodern identity-morpher:

> "[H]e lives from day to day, indulging the pleasure of the moment. One day it's wine, women and song, the next water to drink and a strict diet; one day it's hard physical training, the next indolence and careless ease, and then a period of philosophic study. Often he takes to politics and keeps jumping to his feet and saying or doing whatever comes into his head. Sometimes all his ambitions and efforts are military, sometimes they are all directed to success in business. There's no order or restraint in his life, and he reckons his way of living pleasant, free and happy, and sticks to it through thick and thin" (Plato 1987:381).

Is such a life the consequence if we take SC seriously in our lives? And is such a life able to sustain our existence as moral beings?

When reading Gergen I get the impression that the tragic sides of human existence are passed over in silence. Everything can be made to look good by being redescribed or reinterpreted. SC does not accept that some things are *final*; humans are also vulnerable, mortal, finite beings, and highlighting these features of human existence is probably very important in ethical discussions. To take an extreme example: if I drink-and-drive and kill a child, my task is not necessarily to "explore alternative understandings of 'what is the case'" as Gergen says in another connection (SCC:10). Instead it might be that I am inevitably faced with a demand to accept and learn to live with this fact (its 'facticity'), instead of merely redescribing it in order to console myself. It might be that I have just acted wrongly, and that no alternative understanding will be able to cover over that fact. Accepting the things we cannot change implies what Heidegger called *authenticity*. It involves facing up to our finitude, something which possibly grounds our moral life. If we remove the possibility that we can fail irremediably, as I find SC doing, then we risk impoverishing our lives. Maybe the need to look at the tragic sides of human life is an expression of a distinct European worldview, while North Americans prefer more optimistic, positive inquiries. Or perhaps it can be considered more universal to consider such existential questions. I am not sure. But I do wish to ask if we can sustain our existence as moral and political reasoners if we take SC to our hearts.

I once worked in a shelter for homeless people in New York's Spanish Harlem, and every morning the people who were lucky enough to live there momentarily would gather to say the serenity prayer:

God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change
The courage to change the things I can
And the wisdom to know the difference

It seems to me that while social constructionism certainly gives us courage to change the things we can, the second line of the prayer is forgotten: acceptance of facticity. In my opinion, both are required in order to live a human life, and in that sense, I do not think that social constructionism is rich enough as a theory or philosophy of human life.

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