

Why Private Meanings Are Incoherent

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Introduction: The view from within

1 The epistemology of radical constructivism is based on and tied up with a certain choice of perspective. The central question of how knowledge is “built up” (§42) is addressed strictly from the point of view of a single individual: an observer’s internal system processes raw sensory data by “drawing” connections (§13) according to “patterns” or “schemes” that evolve and are selected according to internal criteria of cognitive viability, i.e., according to whether they have proven to regularly produce actions that are “meaningful” according to internal “basic values” of the individual (§§15–17). Conceiving of other individuals and of society is, then, to be understood along precisely the same lines (§§18 and following). Henceforth, the strictly internal “conceptual schemes” and

“conceptual structures” that radical constructivism takes as its starting point will be called *private*, just to have a convenient term (cf. §37).

2 Obviously, radical constructivism does not content itself with the desire merely to *describe* cognitive processes from a certain individualist stance. One of its most important claims, or so it seems, is that this stance is the *only* one appropriate to epistemology, everything else being unwarranted metaphysical (§32) or ontological (§31) commitments. As for typical sociological notions such as “(linguistic) meanings” or “society,” von Glasersfeld urges that they are abstractions that are to be *generated* by each individual anew (§46); it is only “mutual orientation and adaptation” (§26) that makes conceptual structures of different interacting individuals somehow “compatible” (§28). The radical constructivist stance is even assumed to be a superior attitude for participants in controversial conversations (§29).

How can “private” conceptual schemes be “compatible”?

3 In what follows, I will focus on one crucial step in von Glasersfeld’s argumentation, viz.

his view that every individual constructs his own *private* meanings (understood as conceptual structures or elements thereof) for linguistic expressions, so that linguistic interaction and even *communication* in general is based on a notion of *compatibility* between different speakers’ private conceptual schemes. The central question here is: “Just what does it mean that different private conceptual schemes (private meanings) are compatible, or what constitutes a viable *criterion* to this end?” As von Glasersfeld himself stresses twice (§28, §37), the criteria to be looked for can only be “public,” residing in properties of verbal and non-verbal *actions* of the interacting individuals, properties that can be sensed and processed by the participating system.

4 Obviously, private conceptual schemes of different individuals cannot be compared directly in any way. For one thing, I have no access to my conspecifics’ internal cognitive machinery; all I have is my perception of the actions (more precisely, of the bodily movements and noises) that are the result of this machinery’s inner working. What is perhaps more important, I do not even have access to my own conceptual schemes: I cannot say why

I am sure that this apple is red; I somehow simply know it.

5 So all I can do to check that my conspecifics' private meanings are "compatible" with mine is to look at the circumstances of actual, publicly observable use of the words we use. But again, this is not as trivial as it may sound. As von Glasersfeld puts it in (§28), "this compatibility, as a rule, manifests itself in no other way than that the receiver says and does nothing that contravenes the speaker's expectations." Of course, this criterion cannot be taken literally: in a thought experiment, even someone whose cognitive schemes are identical to mine in any conceivable respect will at times surprise me, e.g., by unveiling some unknown plans or intentions of his or acting in a way I could not possibly foresee due to lack of some vital piece of information. As a consequence, the radical constructivist faces the burden of proof that there is a non-circular way of determining whether some action is unexpected because of discrepancies between the private meaning schemes of individuals or because of "something else" (e.g., disparities in knowledge of the world).

6 All we can say for sure is that we observe (or "conceptualize") more or less stable recurrent interactional patterns around us that gradually change through time, that can, in a certain sense, be extended to include new individuals (e.g., infants), and that differ from what is found in other interactional groups. However, stable interactional patterns also evolve between a man and his dog. What sort of criterion could possibly tell us in the latter case whether the patterns observed are "due to mutually compatible mental operations" (§37)?

7 One possible escape hatch could consist in pointing out that we might be able to *impute* private meanings to our conspecifics in just the same way that we are able to impute to them those general cognitive capabilities "that we become aware of in ourselves" (§22). There are many philosophical pitfalls here, however – it is not at all clear how such an imputation is possible at all. It was David Hume who, in his *Treatise*, pointed out that all that the subject is "aware of" in perceiving or feeling is the perception or feeling itself; by no means do humans sense a "self" that "has" this perception or feeling. But, from the internal point of view, it is only on the model of such a "self" or "mind" that "has" the percep-

tion that we can attribute feelings etc. to other "minds"; first-person ascriptions presuppose third-person ascriptions, not vice versa. See the postscript on the problem of "other minds" in Kripke (1982) for an accessible introduction to these issues.

8 Moreover, there are no clear-cut *behavioral* criteria for what it means to impute intentions or feelings to others. Dennett (1996) gives ample empirical evidence for animals behaving *as if* they are able to adopt the "intentional stance" towards other beings, ascribing intentions and propositional attitudes to them, although all available evidence points to the conclusion that these animals do not possess anything like a conceptual (re)presentation of others' minds, acting only on innate behavioral patterns instead.

An alternative view on interactional patterns

9 The upshot of the preceding discussion is that we are left with a notion of more or less stable and recurrent interactional patterns, a notion that suggests an inverted way of looking at things: when we *ascribe* "compatible" cognitive or conceptual abilities to our conspecifics, we do it *because* we have established recurrent patterns with them. In other words, the patterns are not the causal *consequence* of private schemes having become compatible through some process of adaptation – they *justify* our ascriptions, i.e., they give "meaning" to them, only *after* they have come into existence. Moreover, our ascription acts themselves are simply a *part* of these patterns. The following sections will expand on this view.

10 The genesis of complex interactional patterns involving several individuals can be modeled within a generalized theory of evolution, for a lucid presentation of which see Schurz (2001). Although the vast internal complexity of the individual systems involved has a *causal* bearing on the development of such patterns, the *outcome* of the development has, on a conceptual level of description, a certain *independence* of the private cognitive properties to be found "within" those individuals, because the "geometry" and dynamics of the individuals' "phase spaces" can be vastly different from the geometry and dynamics of the "combined" phase space resulting from their persistent interactions. In particular, the behavior and "attractors" of the combined

phase space may, to a surprising degree, be *insensitive* to details of the inner processes of the interacting individuals. I avail myself of some mathematical notions that are used in a more or less metaphorical, illustrative fashion here, borrowing heavily from Cohen & Stewart (1994), where the ideas briefly alluded to here are expounded at great length.

11 The patterns that emerge through the interaction of sufficiently complex individuals will be only partially "perceivable" by those individuals themselves. Metaphorically, high-dimensional recurrent patterns of state changes (e.g., "attractors") of the combined phase space are "visible" in the "private" phase spaces of the individuals only as lower dimensional "projections." Different individuals' phase spaces may yield very different projections of one and the same pattern. (A good intuitive illustration of how much is lost by projecting an object onto a subspace of lower dimensionality can be gained, e.g., from looking at different two-dimensional images of one and the same four-dimensional hypercube).

12 As such, all this does not pose a threat to radical constructivism: one could simply insist on looking only at the private, internal aspects of such interactional patterns, no matter what additional and "high-dimensional" properties, inaccessible to the individuals involved in them, they might have. The possibility of discussing such additional properties would still be available, if only as some sort of (theoretical) construct.

13 It is precisely linguistic communication that shows why epistemology cannot choose to settle for the view from within. I shall take it for granted that any sound epistemological position must be, at least in principle, linguistically *communicable* to others; language and communication, however, are good examples for interactional patterns of the kind envisaged above. In using language, we simply *rely* on these patterns; we "live in them," much the same way as we live in and live by other artifacts that have been created by man. Whatever privately goes on inside us when we happen to be "in" such a pattern is irrelevant, both in the sense that private inner states are not accessible to others and, more importantly, in the insensitivity sense discussed above.

14 Again, the radical constructivist might be inclined to confine himself to looking at what goes on inside the individual while it is "in"

such a pattern. We shall now discuss the phenomenon of *linguistic reference* to see why this will not do the trick. Referring to an “object,” “idea” or “state of affairs” by means of language is possible only inasmuch as the “entity” referred to is involved in an interactional pattern that is, in turn, intertwined with or part of the pattern network surrounding the use of the linguistic expression in question. What is important here is the fact that we have to look at the patterns *as a whole*, not only its “private,” individual aspects, to see what the reference amounts to. A simple illustration of this would be what Putnam (1975) has called the “linguistic division of labor”: everybody in a certain group might be considered a competent user of the word “gold,” although only a few experts are able to determine with certainty whether a given piece of metal is indeed gold. To give a more mundane example, different people can talk about a certain person even though they have widely differing, and in part possibly false, beliefs about that person. Language here serves as an external device that “transcends” the “private” specifics and idiosyncrasies of the individuals using it.

15 It follows with conceptual necessity that one does *not* refer to some private, inaccessible phenomenon when talking about someone’s feelings, intentions or ways of meaning

and understanding. In ascribing “intentions,” “values” or “feelings” to a person, each of us, including radical constructivists, inevitably reinstantiates a complex social pattern that, although not causally independent of the internal states of that person, cannot somehow magically be directly “about” private aspects of the person.

16 If this argumentation is correct, then it follows that there simply is no such thing as a “private meaning”; the very word “meaning” cannot but refer to something that is entangled in and even *produced* by a whole network of evolving interactional patterns that might have totally different repercussions “inside” different individuals that participate in that network. But if there are no private meanings, then the question of how to check for their interpersonal compatibility simply does not arise. This does not imply that misunderstandings are *a priori* impossible: we constantly face unexpected reactions, children must “acquire” the meanings of words, etc. But the question of what counts as “unexpected,” and why, in which respect, and with what consequences this is so, and the question of under what circumstances someone can be said to have “mastered” the meaning of a word are all settled only *within* a communicational system. They cannot be answered “in advance” from a purely individualist stance.

Inasmuch as *society* is the totality of interactional patterns (in the sense discussed above), this means that a valid notion of society, indeed our being part of it, is *presupposed* in our analyses of communication – not the other way round. In a way, the way human society has evolved is responsible for the most intricate aspects of human cognition – as many others have argued before – without thereby presupposing in any way that society is “a ready-made ontological given” (§31; see Tomasello 1999 for a recent compelling exposition.)

17 As a final point, it should be emphasized that the line of argumentation briefly sketched here does not hinge on any specific ontological assumptions, although the language used to present it, almost inevitably and similarly to many passages in von Glasersfeld’s article, is imbued with the kind of “common sense ontology” that is typical of ordinary language. In particular, even when one takes one’s conspecifics and their actions strictly to be one’s own conceptualizations, it is, I think, quite possible to argue that the referential function of the words we use to ascribe cognitive states or linguistic meanings to another person is, at best, very indirectly connected to whatever private internal processes we assume to be at work “inside” him.