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Ontological Constructivism in Higher Education: To Have, to Know, to Be
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Abstract: The first objective of this article is to acknowledge the significant contribution of constructivism in its ability to critically challenge what realism often takes for granted as certain or as the truth. The second is to explore how it could go much further, beyond thinking and into being. Having concerned itself mostly with epistemology and the transformation of our ways of thinking, constructivism has come to neglect ontology and the possible transformation of our ways of being. Such an ontological turn is considered important for the reform of higher education.

Introduction

Sooner or later in the social sciences, students will eventually be exposed to the fundamental question of human being’s relation to reality and knowledge. Typically, within these different disciplines, a professor will distinguish two types of epistemologies: a realist (or positivist) epistemology and a constructivist epistemology. In my own discipline, the discipline of criminology, students will consequently learn how to distinguish a realist approach to crime, where crime is considered through its objective properties, and a constructivist approach, which deals with the same object but as a social construction of reality (Becker, 1963; Hartjen, 1974).

In the first approach, students learn to consider crime as a reality which exists independently of an observer’s observation, and which thus possesses essential characteristics that the observer can grasp, know, identify and problematize as such. The constructivist perspective criticizes this approach for ignoring the fact that crime is first and foremost the definition of a behavior which, through categories constituted in language, can correspondingly be interpreted as a crime. In this latter perspective, students learn to think of the notion of crime as an institutional label that the criminal justice system or the observer (who observes “reality” through the conceptual categories of this institution) projects onto the facts of behavioral reality in order to ultimately interpret these behavioral facts as criminal. In constructivist criminology, we will even go so far as to say that “there is no intrinsic reason for a definition of crime to be restricted to a behavioral conception [and] in fact, there is no intrinsic reason to include any reference to behavior in a definition of crime” (Hartjen, 1974: 5); in short, “crime” is not to be “found” in the behavior, but in language as a linguistic abstraction.

Students learn that what constitutes a crime will vary in time and space, but also according to the circumstances surrounding the execution of the behavior and the observation of the behavior. The police officer who observes a fight outside a bar will be inclined to interpret the constitutive elements of the situation as being consistent with the crime of assault while a fight breaking out on the rink of the National Hockey League will tend to be seen, interpreted, and defined as a simple violation of the rules of the game. Obviously, what also varies according to these situational definitions are their consequences: as a crime, fighting may lead to a criminal conviction with the potential consequence of incarceration and a criminal record, while a violation of the rules of hockey usually leads to a few minutes on the penalty bench or a game suspension if the case is more serious. Usually, in hockey fights, the possibility of incarcerating individuals will not be considered. This, like many other phenomena of everyday life, reflects
what William Isaac Thomas has captured in his theorem stating that: “If men define situations as
real, they are real in their consequences” (1928: 572). As the renowned Jewish theologian Joshua
Abraham Heschel once said: “words create worlds.”

Words create Worlds

When words create worlds, we can speak of constructivism, and when words create being, we
can speak of ontological constructivism. To illustrate this notion or to point to its constructive
mechanism, I would like to start with an example used by Werner Erhard in a speech called The
Heart of the Matter (1985).¹ The example takes us back to the witch hunts of the 16th and 17th
centuries, when men accused women of witchcraft and burned them at the stake. We know today
that what they were burning were not witches, but women. We know today that “witches” are a
superstition, but if one wants to understand the behavior of these men from their own experience,
that is, understanding them phenomenologically,² one has to see that what they were burning
were not women, but witches. Men defined witches as real, and real or not, witches, as defined in
the situation, was a label which became deadly real in its consequences. These women who by
social agreement had been epistemologically defined as witches were phenomenologically
experienced as such, that is, experienced not as women, not as human beings, but factually as
real witches. It’s not just that these men were thinking of these women as witches; the problem is
indeed much more profound and beyond thinking. It involves being: the label goes much deeper
than merely epistemology; deep in ontology,³ these men were that witches were. Witches were
not a superstition; witches were an is. And as Erhard argued, as an is, “superstitions are very
powerful,” much more than as superstitions. If only “witches” had been experienced as a
superstition in the 16th and 17th centuries, no one would have been burned at the stake, but as an
is, “witches” were experienced as real and real were the consequences. This led Erhard to
conclude that “a superstition is only a superstition when it is not a superstition, a superstition is
only a superstition when it is an is,” when a superstition is experienced as real rather than as a
superstition.

Despite the fact that we have long stopped burning people at the stake for witchcraft, we
continue to behave with the exact same principle. Indeed, the same analysis would remain
relevant looking at more recent events in the history of mankind. Through the same approach,

¹ Erhard, Werner (1985).
² Grasping phenomenologically the experience of what is experienced as such by human beings is the task of
phenomenology. Phenomenology refers to “the method of abstemious reflection on the basic structures of the lived
experience of human existence”, with the “aims to abstain from theoretical, polemical, suppositional, and emotional
intoxications” (Van Manen, 2016: 26). Merleau-Ponty speaks of “the attempt to provide a direct description of our
experience such as it is, and without any consideration of its psychological genesis or of the causal explanations that
the scientist, historian, or sociologist might offer of that experience” (1945, xx). Back “to the things themselves”,
said Husserl, quoted in Heidegger (2010:32). And the return to the things themselves in phenomenology means “to
return to this world prior to knowledge, this world of which knowledge always speaks...”. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945:
Ixxii). That world is the world of human experience as-lived.
³ Ontology is concerned with being, with what shows up as is, in my raw, none-intellectualized, direct experience of
the world. One of the reasons why ontology is important is because what shows up in such a way, in my direct
experience of the world, is fundamentally different from what shows up epistemologically in my conscious and self-
reflective representation of that experience. Another reason why ontology is important is that although “prereflexive
experience is the ordinary experience that we live in and that we live through for most, if not all, of our day-to-day
existence” (Van Manen, 2016: 28), we know almost nothing about it. Ontology is concerned with the essence of the
as-lived experience, with what has often been epistemologically concealed but can be revealed phenomenologically.
one could consider the fate of Indigenous children in Canadian Indian Residential schools, which were subsidized by the state and supported by the church in order to re-socialize and ultimately assimilate children from Indigenous communities. Some speak of cultural genocide. There again, from the point of view of the lived experience, the political and religious actors involved at the time did not place children in these schools; *phenomenologically*, they placed “des enfants sauvages,” as people of aboriginal communities used to be called at the time. Dominique Rankin painfully reminded us of this label in a work published recently with Marie-Josée Tardif, a work entitled “On nous appelait les sauvages: souvenirs et espoirs d’un chef héréditaire algonquin” (Rankin and Tardif, 2016). Through the same lens, one could also look at the way Nazis experienced Jews during the Second World War, or look at the way Hutus experienced Tutsis in 1994 Rwanda, or at the way refugees, people of color, members of LGBTQ+ community are experienced in contemporary societies... And if we were to drill down to a more micro-sociological observation and look at the quality of our own relationships, including those with our loved ones—a father, a mother, a spouse, a friend, etc.—what are the “is” labels running our lives in these relationships? What are the superstitions not yet distinguished as superstitions that are consequently powerfully dictating the quality of these relationships? What worlds have I entered through the use of language? What ontology have I inherited or rather constructed?

Here the word “inherited” must be used with caution if one wants to avoid reproducing the illusion of a fixed ontology. Certainly, socialization and culture play a role in shaping who I believe I am and the way I experience myself as a person. But socialization and culture also play a role in reproducing the illusion that these are the “sets of cards” that I have inherited and with which I get to play the game of life. Certainly, socialization, culture and even personal experiences have something to do with the set of values that I live by, and the sets of ways of being and acting that I have access to. But as influential as these influences might be, they are not deterministic nor fixed: they are socially, culturally and psychologically constructed and could be approached as such. Whatever is approached as fixed is experienced as a “that’s it reality”. Whatever is approached as constructed can be opened to the possibility of deconstruction and reconstruction. Whatever I point to when I say “I” or “me” is pointing to a linguistic construction, something that has been shaped and perhaps even fixed in *language*, but not in *being*. The “I” that I point to when I say “I” or “me” is not inherited in a way that remains necessarily closed to the possibility of an ontological reconstruction. The conditions of such reconstruction is the main topic of this contribution.

As the realists that we all tend to be in our ordinary daily lives, we do not usually bother with these questions; indeed, “the man in the street does not ordinarily trouble himself about what is ‘real’ to him and about what he ‘knows,’” rather “he takes ‘his reality’ and his ‘knowledge’ for granted” (Berger and Luckman, 1966: 14). The realists that we all are in our daily lives experience the world as if there was a direct correspondence between the theories we have about the world and the world as it objectively exists. The words seem to fit the world, so no questions are asked⁴. For example, the realist who thinks and sees his mother as an unloving

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⁴ The possibility of such questioning is either suppressed or else not seen as a possibility. I might prefer to watch my favorite show on Netflix than to face the question of who is the “I” that I am pointing to in the phrase “I want” or “I like”—the flourishing industry of entertainment is not the only contributing factor to the suppression of such question, but it is undeniably playing an important role. Another way to not ask the question is to not even see the possibility of raising it as a question worth asking; the question is not raised as a question worth dwelling into because the answers to that question occur to us as obvious. Phenomenologically, it’s not that the question has been suppressed, it’s rather that it has been tranquilized in “tranquilized obviousness,” to speak like Heidegger (1927).
mother thinks and lives “unloving” as if “unloving” was as real factually as is the ground beneath his feet or the ceiling above his head. If one were to question this realist’s assumption that his mother is an unloving person, he would likely have no trouble providing evidence to support his claim and be perfectly capable of arguing why it is so. Obviously, if upon reflection or in a more philosophical state of mind one were to suspend the routine of daily life and confront the realist son about the fact that there is a difference in nature between the “unloving” character of his mother and the ground under his feet or the ceiling above his head, he could probably see the validity of the argument and indeed see that there is a difference. He would have no difficulty recognizing that “unloving” is a value judgment and not at all an objective reality. However, would such insight be enough to transform his relationship to his mother? Would thinking of “unloving” as a construction of reality lead to being that “unloving” is a construction of reality? If that were the case, I could stop writing this paper and move on to a more pressing issue for society. But I don’t think it is the case and I don’t see a more pressing issue for society than learning how to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct worlds through words. And I don’t see where—other than in universities and institutions of higher education—the incorporation of such matters could be more pressing either. That said, teaching the fundamentals of constructivism and doing it as we have traditionally been doing it, usually in a purely epistemological way, might produce change of thoughts for our students, but rarely will it produce change of hearts, to use Erich Fromm’s distinction (Fromm, 1976:9). Considering that at the end of their studies our students will still be “people in the street,” I believe that it is important to explore constructivism beyond the epistemological approach and include ontological inquiries about the being of human beings and the possibilities of being for human beings.

Before addressing the specificity of ontological constructivism, I will explore the broader question of constructivism as a relation to the world, illustrate what this relation looks like, and how it contrasts with the realist relation to the world held by “people in the street.”

A constructivist relation to the world: what does that look like?

Generally, as people in the street, our constructivism manifests itself only in moments of reflexivity, when we suspend our interactions in order to observe ourselves. Our reflexivity allows for a second-order observation through which we can thematize, as an object of analysis, our first-order observations, that is, those carried out in real time as part of our interactions with the world. For the son with the “unloving” mother, unless his reflexivity comes to impact his immediate actions and does so directly in the heat of the interaction, the constructivist insights may enable him to understand and explain better the dynamic of the interactions between him and his mother; they may even lead him to take on himself his own share of responsibility in this dynamic. But for the most part, the contribution will usually remain strictly epistemological; it will not make any difference in his experience of the mother as an unloving mother. The now constructivist son certainly has an advantage over the realist son; at least, in being reflexive, he can see that he is himself the source of this construction of his mother as an “unloving” mother—something that the realist son cannot see since his mother is “unloving,” because that is the kind of person she is. But unless this difference can make a real difference in ontology, in who the son is being in his as-lived experience of the mother as a mother or as a person, this advantage of the constructivist son over the realist son will itself remain strictly epistemological. In ontology, in the immediate experience, the constructivist son will continue to be that his mother is unloving. Epistemologically there is a difference, and it is an important one.
epistemologically, but ontologically, in the phenomenology of the interactions, in his experience of the mother, there will be no difference between the outcomes produced by either of the two perspectives: both perspectives, one giving the constructivist son and the other giving the realist son, in the respective ways of being and interacting, will be ontologically given by an unloving mother.

Again, I must insist, I am not saying that reflexivity and epistemological insights are unimportant. They are important. The constructivist person in the street is intellectually more aware of the fact that he has no access to the objective properties of the world and that his way of perceiving the world is not the world. It is, rather, the world as he finds it modulated by his senses within the numerous limits that characterize human perception through senses: biological limits, social and cultural limits, as well as those associated with the influence of the various significances placed on past experiences in the constitution of identity. Thanks to his reflexivity, the constructivist is able to question ideologies, labels, value judgments, prejudices, and stereotypes that we commonly find at the source of stigmatization, social exclusion, and symbolic violence.

In criminology for example, the constructivist student is not only able to deconstruct the illusion of crime as an objective reality; he or she is also able to deconstruct the idea of a criminal man. The student knows that the so-called “criminal” man became the criminal man out of being defined as such, as someone who came to be perceived as criminal. The constructivist student readily recognizes that this difference between the criminal and the non-criminal man does not exist in the man himself, but rather takes shape in the language of a specific social system. The constructivist student will also readily recognize that the perpetrator of behavior labelled as a criminal could be defined quite differently if other categories of language were to be used, for example, through the lens of religion as a sinner instead of a criminal.

The constructivist, much more than the realist, is thus able to recognize the polycontextual character of modern society. As Luhmann explains, such a society “applies completely different codes, completely different ‘frames,’ completely different principal distinctions according to whether it describes itself from the standpoint of a religion or the standpoint of science, from the standpoint of law or the standpoint of politics, from the standpoint of pedagogy or the standpoint of economics” (Luhmann, 2002: 52). Consequently, the constructivist is epistemologically aware that in such a society “each system will understand the object only in accordance with the proper meaning of that system” (Amado, 1993: 130). If one is aware of this polycontextual character of society, then one is also aware of “the impossibility of knowing reality in itself” (Luhmann, in Amado, 1989: 31). And knowing that is important because that is what first needs to be known to create the possibility to explore ontological constructivism and its possibilities for the being of human beings.

Constructivism thus represents a very important change in our way of thinking about the world and in our capacity to question the realist certainties that one might entertain in his or her experience of the world. But the question remains: does it represent a significant change in the way we are that the world is? I argue that development of constructivism in modernity is still incomplete, still limited to the development of epistemological insights which certainly change our way of thinking about the world, but not necessarily our way of being in the world or our way of being related to the world, including, in that world, our way of being related to oneself. In other words, having remained essentially epistemological, constructivism is yet to implement an
correlative ontological dimension, an ontological constructivism through which what is transformed is also, beyond our way of thinking, our way of *being* in the world.

**Closing the gap between thinking and being**

In 1995, Quebec conducted a referendum to determine whether or not the province should continue to be part of the Canadian federation or if it should rather claim its sovereignty as a separate country. At the time, the leader of the *Parti Québécois*, Jacques Parizeau, supporting the “Yes” position, had claimed that any individual living in Quebec was a ‘*Québécois*’ regardless of his or her ethnic origin. He had claimed that this status, as such, was enough to legitimize the participation of Quebec-living immigrants in the referendum. Epistemologically, the discourse was inclusive and politically unifying. But when the results were confirmed in favour of the “No” vote, Parizeau took the stage and delivered his response. The gap with ontology showed up. Carried by an ontology which was no longer in phase with his epistemology, he attributed the defeat to the “ethnic vote.” Epistemologically, this brilliant politician could recognize perfectly well that the notion of ‘*Québécois*’ could not in any way be limited to “born and raised Québécois,” that the notion had to be more inclusive; but on an ontological level, in the lived experience of the man, immigrants were not experienced as “real” *Québécois* and their votes did not have the same legitimacy as the votes of the “*Québécois pure laine.*” Was the first discourse of inclusiveness a political manipulation? Was Parizeau dishonest then? Some suggested that he was. But I believe that there is another way to look at it: here, and like anywhere else, it is often more interesting to explore the possibility that *both* discourses might have been sincere, the gap between them relying on the fact that the first one was reflecting an epistemological construction of reality and the second one, an ontological experience. Epistemologically, in the world of knowledge, theories, ideas, politics, and principles, Parizeau *knew* that any individual living in Quebec was a *Québécois*, regardless of his or her ethnic origin. But in the “as-lived experience” of it, ontologically, at the level of *being*, that was not who Parizeau was being. That any individual living in Quebec was a *Québécois*, regardless of his or her ethnic origin was perhaps characterizing his *way of thinking*, but not his *way of being*. And perhaps that it is not too much to say, as did Merleau-Ponty, that ultimately to me “the world is not what I think, but what I live [*ce que je vis*]” (2014: xxx).

In epistemological constructivism, as insightful as a thought can be, there is still a gap between thinking and being, between knowing and experiencing, a gap that does not exist in the phenomenology of the realist. Being in the realist’s world is normally perfectly correlated with his way of thinking about the world: “my mother is ‘unloving’ because that is simply who my mother *is* just as much as it *is* who I am; I *am* that my mother is that way.”

The examples provided so far in this text are simple, but nevertheless should be enough to help illustrate the gap or the difference between two types of constructivism: epistemological constructivism, well-established in academia, and ontological constructivism, yet to be developed and explored more rigorously, especially in academia.

**Ontological Constructivism**

What would ontological constructivism look like? I will take two examples to illustrate. The first is inspired by Garfinkel’s ethnomethodological study of the case of Agnes who was born and
raised as a man and later declared herself a woman. The second example pertains to my own personal transformation with regard to my professional relationship with the university.

When Garfinkel met Agnes at UCLA in the early 1960s, she was 19 years old. She was not questioning gender and the way it was culturally divided between two sexes, male and female, at the time. She lived her life in such a way that there are men and there are women. What she claimed however is that, in her case, her male genitals were an anomaly. That anomaly taken aside, she considered herself to be a woman; to herself, she was not a transsexual nor a transvestite, but a “real” woman. Until the age of 17, she was raised the way men are typically raised, according to the standards of masculinity that culturally predominated in our society. But at 19 years old, at the UCLA clinic, Agnes was looking for a sex change. At the time, Garfinkel was participating in a research project on transsexuality.

Garfinkel showed how Agnes had to create herself as a woman. She had “to produce her being-woman as a continuous practical accomplishment, ordered from within, perfectly proportioned to circumstances and occasions” (Quéré, in Le Breton, 2004: 159). In meeting with Agnes and getting to know her through interviews and numerous hours spent with her, Garfinkel discovered that, although Agnes was able to represent with ease the signs of femininity and if at first glance this “mise en scène de soi” seemed routinized and natural, a more detailed analysis would reveal that the representation of this femininity required from Agnes “a never ending effort of observation” (Le Breton, 2004: 159). In this effort, Agnes found in the mother of her friend Bill a source of inspiration, asking her for advice in matters regarding the kitchen as well as in ways of dressing. In general, she would “observe the behavior of women in different situations and then imitate their attitudes” (Le Breton, 2004: 160). In the context of his interviews with Agnes, Garfinkel had also noticed that she would even use him to try to understand how “a woman should ‘normally’ answer such and such a question” (ibid, 160).

Both Le Breton and Quéré would see in this continuous effort of self-observation a critical difference between Agnes and women born with female genitalia. For a “born-woman,” so to speak, unlike Agnes, “the accomplished mastery of her femininity goes without saying, she is socially and culturally accustomed to satisfying the attitudes and roles which have been imposed on her since childhood” (Le Breton, 2004: 160). Agnes, on the other hand, Quéré explains, “cannot rely like ‘normal’ people on a practical routinized mastery of the methods of achieving her femininity, she is forced to control almost reflexively all the operations necessary to the actualisation of the ‘normal’ woman” (Quéré, in Le Breton, 2004: 159). It is true, as Coulon underlined, that in “this ‘exhibition’ of the sexual personality in everyday life activities and behaviors… Agnes had to monitor this ‘self-representation of herself’ in order to appear as ‘un cas de la chose réelle’” (Coulon, 1987: 41). She had to “continually control her attitudes” (ibid 41). However, beyond the differences, one could also look at the similarities between Agnes and the woman born with female genitalia. One would then notice that self-monitoring around sexual personality is also at play in the everyday life of any woman, at least in the early stages of her socialisation. It is here important to recall with De Beauvoir that a woman is never born a woman, she becomes a woman.

No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure which the human female assumes within society; it is the whole of civilization that produces this intermediate product between the male and the castrato that we call feminine. Only the mediation of others can constitute an individual like an other. As long as
the child exists for himself or herself, the child cannot understand himself or herself as sexually differentiated (De Beauvoir, 1949: 285).

A person becomes a woman through specific processes of socialization that are implemented within the framework of a specific culture. In the born female woman, learning to be feminine will sooner or later also require a certain self-monitoring in order to correspond to what is socially and culturally expected of a woman. Of course, the same applies to men. In their masculinity, males are not born men either; a male becomes a man through a differential process of socialization, namely the one which concerns itself with constructing masculinity. The manifestation of one’s masculinity in speaking and being also requires self-monitoring. I personally remember how very early in my childhood I was asked to change my way of walking, considered too “springy” to be “manly.” I remember later on in high school my classmates telling me to stop sitting the way I was sitting, with a limp wrist resting over crossed legs; too “effeminée,” too “girly” for the man I ought to be. I also remember the criticism I had earned for my long hair when I was a teenager, when I also adopted wearing a headband. What interests me in this comparison is the process through which a being declares him or herself, and as such creates, constructs, and eventually experiences him or herself ontologically as “un cas de la chose réelle.” In Agnes’ case, the identity is gendered. The ontological construction pertains to her gender. But I do not see a significant difference between this process and any other process leading to the ontological construction of any identity—at least not in form, although there is certainly a very significant difference in substance. For example, in form, I don’t see a significant difference between this process and the one leading to the social construction of the consumer in our capitalist society of consumption, just like I don’t see in form a significant difference between this one and the construction of the “loving kindness” identity that Buddhism advocates. Again, the ontological traits on which ontological constructivism insists are not an essence of the being as being; rather, it is an essence of the experience of being in time. In this sense, I am not personally concerned with what “la vieille Europe” used to concern itself with, namely the substance of being as always and already there. Ontology can be intentionally constructed, and at the same time, once constructed, as-lived, it is still real in its consequences.

The second example is my relationship to the university. During the first five years after being hired, my experience of the university was rather negative. Almost all the major facets of the job were painful to me: the pressure for research and publication, the student evaluations of my teaching, the supervision of graduate students, the administrative duties... Some colleagues were at a different stage in their career and tried to change my “mind set” to make me see things differently. They would share with me their personal experience, an experience that had nothing to do with mine, and often one that was much more positive than mine. I would listen to what they had to say and, although I could see what they were seeing, I could not find in their speaking a way to be what they were being. For me, the university would remain an inauthentic institution, pretending to be sensitive to the student experience and to the quality of research and publication. But that was all pretense, because in reality, I knew, or more accurately, I was, that the university was not what it pretended to be. In the reality of my own experience, which to me was real, factual, and objective, the university had proven to me, time and time again, to be essentially about rankings, donors, and student money; in short, the university was primarily concerned with revenue. In my relationship to the university, I could not experience a university; I could only experience a business. And of course, I found colleagues who would share my views and validate the “realness” of my experience. Not only were we convinced that the university was the way it was, but we were also convinced that we were right about that and that anybody
not seeing this as obvious was wrong. In the 17th century, Francis Bacon, the English philosopher, had the following to say about human understanding:

The human understanding, when any proposition has been once laid down, (either from general admission and belief, or from the pleasure it affords,) forces everything else to add fresh support and confirmation; and although more cogent and abundant instances may exist to the contrary, yet either does not observe or despises them, or gets rid of and rejects them by some distinction, with violent and injurious prejudice, rather than sacrifice the authority of its first conclusions (Bacon, 1620).

Bacon’s remarks are valid for what pertains to human understanding, but the problem might be much more insidious when it comes to experiencing. Indeed, in my own experience, I don’t recall refusing to take into account contrary instances; I don’t believe I ever tried to rule them out or to dismiss them and reject them. On the contrary, I remember trying to adopt them, to make them mine, to let myself be inspired by them in the deconstruction of my own certainties, hoping that by doing so I would eventually be able to transform my relationship to the university. I tried to reduce the significance I had come to give to its inauthenticities and to give more significance to the good sides of it, striving to value some interesting aspects of the job and to be more grateful towards a profession that I knew was still providing me with excellent working conditions. I knew it, but I wasn’t it. Knowing it made no difference with regard to my not-being-it. It gave me a bit of hope from time to time—it did allow me to see the glass half full rather than half empty—but it never allowed me to transform my being. Who I was being, regardless of what I was thinking, was that the glass, half full or half empty, was still wrong or bad. Therefore, the experience itself was still not truly fulfilling. Depending on the day, depending on my mood, the university would look a little bit better or a little bit worse, but fundamentally, I was still that this organisation was inauthentic and this gave me ways of being and acting correlative with this view.

Interestingly, during all these years, in my classrooms, I would be teaching the transformational power of constructivism in our relationship to the world. To explain this transformational power, I would use sophisticated diagrams which would allow my students to see, for example, the distinction between facts and stories. I would suggest, like constructivists do, that the cause of human suffering is rooted mainly in the stories, much more so than in the facts themselves. I would then logically make the argument to the effect that, if we admit that we are suffering mostly because of the stories, and if it is true that we are the ones constructing these stories, then it would be also true that a major part of human suffering could be avoided if only facts were reinterpreted into different stories. I still stand by these remarks; I still hold them as valid, but being valid in knowledge doesn’t make them impactful in experience. My students could see what I was saying, but for the most part, they, just like me, could not be what I was saying. The fundamentals of constructivism were covered, but they were covered epistemologically, not at all covered ontologically, in the “as-lived” experience of it. It certainly wasn’t enough to transform in any way my experience of the university. I was still counting the years I had left before retirement, and I had 25 of them to kill.

Today, retirement is still a concern for me, but in a very different way. I am no longer waiting for it. I now have only 15 years left, and that seems way too short. I no longer recognize myself in the conversation I used to have about the university. Nor do I recognize myself in the experience that I was having of the institution during those first five years. It’s not simply that I
have stopped thinking what I used to think about the university; it’s that I have stopped being who I used to be. I no longer am that the university is an inauthentic institution.

Am I wrong today? Was I wrong then? Which is it? For a realist, it certainly cannot be both. A realist would want to find out the truth about the university. He would look for the truth in the objective properties of the university, away from any subjective experience of it. What the realist tends to neglect, however, in this quest, is not only that the truth is not accessible as the truth; it’s that even if it was accessible as such, it would not necessarily translate as the truth in the subjective experience of being. Every morning, what shows up at work is not the objective “truth,” it’s the subjective truth of a lived experience, the experience of the employee, and this subjective truth is objectively real in its consequences. This subjective truth does determine the quality of the experience for this professor and for probably a lot of other people around him, including his students. Who I am today is that the university is an environment that provides the possibility of an extraordinary experience for personal development through the sharing of knowledge for the betterment of society and people. Did I have to force myself into believing this? No. Just like Agnes didn’t have to force herself to believe in her gender identity either. Did the university change? It didn’t. The facts are the same. Did my colleagues with a positive experience finally convince me? Not at all. Then what happened? The short answer to this question is I don’t know. I be, but I don’t know. I have the experience, but I don’t have the knowledge. Something happened, that’s certain, and it happened at the level of ontology, that also is certain: who I had been in my relation to the university, I no longer am. That I know. But I don’t know and I cannot explain what happened or how it happened. That’s mainly due to the nature of being: being simply cannot be explained, it can only be experienced. Any explanation of being cannot be anything other than an explanation of being, and an explanation of being is different than “being” itself, always. That said, one can speak about being in such a way that being shows up in its speaking. That’s how good poets speak about being. But I am not a poet; I’m a scholar, and scholars have yet to learn how to speak about being in such a way that being shows up in their speaking. In academia, this is not the focus of attention and has not led to any rigorous ontological inquiry, at least nothing comparable to the rigor of the inquiry conducted by Heidegger in Being and Time.

For now, the only thing that I can do is highlight some similarities in the transformation of both Agnes and me. In both experiences, at some point, something like a declaration happened. Agnes first had to declare herself as a woman to eventually be a woman. This declaration of Agnes was not only verbal, it was not limited to what was said in her speaking. The declaration also happened in the practical accomplishments of Agnes, in her behavior, her gestures, in her ways of being, in her many ways of embodying “la chose réelle.” In ethnomethodology, it is said that “the world is not given once and for all, it is [rather] realized in practical accomplishments” (Coulon, 1987: 42). For Agnes, “in everyday activities and behaviors, it would be critical to ensure a form of ‘exhibition’ of the sexual personality” (Coulon, 1987: 41). In my case, I too had to declare myself in a different way with regard to my being in the university and through this declaration, in everyday activities and behaviors, realize the declaration in practical accomplishments, exhibiting as such a different persona, a different being, “un cas de la chose réelle.” This being was the being of someone who now is that the university is an environment that provides the possibility of an extraordinary experience for personal development through the sharing of knowledge and for the betterment of society and people. From the declaration and through practical accomplishments, this university, in the experience of it, “s’est mise en scène comme réalité objective” (Quéré, in Coulon, 1987: 40); like
Agnes, I have since experienced my subjective reality as objective. The university, now occurring for me as an extraordinary experience for personal development through the sharing of knowledge and for the betterment of society and people, has become real in its consequences. The construction is no longer purely epistemological; it has become ontological. Neither I nor Agnes need to convince ourselves; we don’t need to look for evidence, or to put things into perspective, or to survive on “positive thinking.” We simply are that we are what is being declared in everything we are and everything we do. There are no gaps left to fill between thinking and being.

Resistance in Academia

If I can personally see the potential contribution of adding ontological constructivism to the curriculum of several if not all disciplines in academia, not everyone would agree. Some see such an addition as a strategy to incorporate personal development or self-help techniques in an institution whose true vocation is and should only be defined around the development of knowledge. This position has lost sight of what Michel Foucault reminded us about the ancient philosophical asceticism, namely that what used to be decisive in its framework was not knowledge itself, but the “ethopietic” character or not of knowledge: decisive then was whether or not knowledge could function in such a way as to modify or transform the ethos, “the way of being, the mode of existence of the individual”; only then could it be considered “useful” (Cremonosi and al., 2013: 18). The skeptics fail to see that the development of knowledge is a form of personal development: a personal development occurring through the development of knowledge. Failing to see that constitutes, in my opinion, a blind spot that limits the way we think of the university and its mission. I find in Erich Fromm’s work several distinctions that will help shed some light on this issue.

In To Have Or To Be? Fromm distinguishes “two fundamental modes of existence, or two different kinds of orientation toward self and the world, two different types of character structure whose respective dominance determines the totality of how a person thinks, feels, and acts” (Fromm, 1976: 24). As he explains, “in the having mode of existence my relationship to the world is one of possessing and owning, one in which I want to make everybody and everything, including myself, my property” (Ibid, 24). This mode of existence is the mode within which too many scholars still relate to knowledge: knowledge as a “thing” to possess, to have, and hopefully for the students on graduation day, to have more of than upon admission. And it is usually in this mode of existence that students show up to class, if they show up at all:

Students in the having mode of existence will listen to a lecture, hearing the words and understanding their logical structure and their meaning and, as best they can, will write down every word in their [notes]—so that, later on, they can memorize their notes and thus pass an examination. But the content does not become part of their individual system of thought, enriching and widening it. Instead, they transform the words they hear into fixed clusters of thought, or whole theories, which they store up. The students and the content of the lectures remain strangers to each other, except that each student has become the owner of a collection of statements made by somebody else (who had either created them or taken them over from another source) (Fromm, 1976: 29).
In the having mode of existence, students will learn to know more, to know better, to know differently, critically, but they usually don’t learn to be-with and eventually to be-through what they have learned. In this “‘banking’ concept of education, in which, as Freire explained “the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” of knowledge, “the more storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (Freire, 1970: 72-73). Students might possess the knowledge, but they are not being-with nor being-through that knowledge.

This possibility to be-with and to be-through is only made possible when learning unfolds in the mode of existence of being, where “the process of learning has an entirely different quality for students” (Fromm, 1976: 29). In that mode, says Fromm, students “do not go to the course of lectures […] as tabulae rasae” (Ibid). Instead, Fromm continues:

They have thought beforehand about the problems the lectures will be dealing with and have in mind certain questions and problems of their own. They have been occupied with the topic and it interests them. Instead of being passive receptacles of words and ideas, they listen, they hear, and most important, they receive and they respond in an active, productive way. […] Their listening is an alive process. […] They do not simply acquire knowledge that they can take home and memorize. Each student has been affected and has changed: each is different after the lecture than he or she was before it. (Fromm 1976: 29)

Fromm draws our attention to the notion of “interest,” looking at its meaning from the perspective of its Latin roots: “inter-esse, ‘to be in [or] among’ it” (Fromm, 1976:30). Being interested in something is not to know it, nor is it to have it. It is, rather, to be with it, to dwell in it, to live and grapple with it, to experience life from it and through it. On the phenomenological level of the lived experience, the interested student is not in a relationship of alienation with knowledge; he or she is in a relationship of resonance (Rosa, 2019), just like it can be said of Agnes that she was in a relationship of resonance with her femininity as much as I am now with the university as providing experiences for personal development and for the betterment of society and people. In Rosa’s work, “resonance is the ‘other’ of alienation” (Ibid, 178). Without resonance, that is to say, in alienation as a mode of relating to the world, “the subject encounters the subjective, objective, and/or social world as either indifferent or repulsive” (Ibid, 178). Alienation is, as such, “the negation of the good life” (Rosa, 2014 :10). Like alienation, resonance is also “a specific mode of relation—i.e a specific way of being-related-to-the-world—but one in which the world or at least some segment of it is experienced as responsive” (Rosa, 2019: 169). That is to say that the phenomena is bidirectional: my being responds to the world and the world is impacted by my being responsive. In Rosa’s own words: “Resonance denotes a mutually responsive relationship in which subjects not only can be touched, but are in turn also capable of touching, i.e., of attaining world through one’s actions” (Rosa, 2019: 158).

In resonance, being-with and being-through knowledge is not incompatible with having knowledge, as whatever I am being-with or through, in resonance, I also own. However, in alienation—that is, in having it without owning it, without being with it or being through it—the so-called “student experience” remains itself alienated, incomplete and deprived of any resonance, vitality, aliveness, or self-satisfaction. Hence, the question is not a matter of having or not having; rather, the question is a matter of the mode of existence in which one experiences having, whether from alienation or from resonance. As Funk pointed out in his foreword to
another of Fromm’s books, *The Art of Being*, “the issue is not whether one does or does not have something, but rather whether a person’s heart is set on what he or she does or does not have” (Funk, 1992: ix).

**Conclusion**

Broadening the university’s mission so as to include in its programs the exploration of being and the transformative potential of ontological constructivism will first require the capacity to see what the having mode of existence does not allow us to see, namely that this mode of existence is nothing but a possibility among others, one that is not without alternatives. This seeing could be the first step down the path of institutional transformation through *future-based reforms* (Garcia and Dubé, 2017).

Future-based reforms are distinct from past-based reforms. While the latter use the past as a point of reference for the present and “are prompted by proposals to change existing structures [...] on the basis of the distinction between deficiencies and possible improvements” (Luhmann, 2011: 275), the former use the future as point of reference for the present and are prompted by the possibility of realizing a created future that leaves those who are contributing to its realization deeply inspired by what’s possible beyond the routinized and traditionalized possibilities of the past. In other words, while past-based reforms are concerned with fixing, future-based reforms are concerned with creating. Creating, rather than fixing, gives being and acting to those involved, and does so in such a way that their being and acting in the present is coherent not with the past, but with the realization of the created future.

For the future-based reform of post-secondary education, the seeing of the possibility of ontological constructivism must first show up in the subjective experience of scholars, university administrators, and ministers of education, those who have the power to implement such reform. In order for this seeing to show up in their experience, these individuals will first need to liberate themselves from the past, from what they already know and take for granted about what education is or what it is to be educated.

Liberating oneself from what one already knows is difficult, especially in a culture that has reduced the meaning of liberation to simply mean liberation from outside forces, referring mainly to “political liberation” (Fromm, 1993: 7). Certainly important politically, this kind of liberation is not the most urgent for our purpose because the “chains” of resistance with regard to the ontological reform of the university are not outside but inside the individual and “the desires and thoughts that the suggestion-apparatus of society fills him with, chains him more thoroughly than outer chains” (Ibid, 7). According to Fromm—and Michel Foucault would not state it any differently—“this is so because man can at least be aware of outer chains but be unaware of inner chains, carrying them with the illusion that he is free” (Ibid: 7). This is perhaps the biggest challenge in the context of our future-based reform since the reformer can very well “overthrow the outer chains, but how can he rid himself of chains of whose existence he is unaware?” (Ibid:7). This problem is indeed critical and must be taken seriously if any ontological reform is

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to be implemented on campus. How can one be made aware of something concealed in a blind spot? How can one come to see what one cannot see?

If one explores carefully what Heidegger had to say about the call of conscience in *Being and Time*, one could formulate the answer as follows: *one can come to see if one can come to hear*. What is to be heard from listening authentically to the call of conscience is not uttered in the mode of a distinction between right and wrong. It is, rather paradoxically, uttered in the mode of silence. The call of conscience to which Heidegger refers doesn’t say anything: “it does not even come to words” (Heidegger, 1927: 263). It is, as such, deprived of “any kind of utterance,” “the call ‘says’ nothing which could be talked about” (263). And yet it calls. It calls in a way that “gives the heedfully curious ears nothing to hear that could be passed along and publicly spoken about” (266). Conscience, says Heidegger, “speaks solely and constantly in the mode of silence” (263).

Such a call is not calling for thinking; it is calling being. It is not to be heard, but experienced. In the experience of it, it manifests itself in the form of what Heidegger describes as “an ‘uncanny’ feeling” which at the level of experience is similar to the experience of “not-being-at-home” (Heidegger, 1927: 182). This experience of the call does call for something. It calls for and calls forth an authentic potentiality-for-being-in-the-world for the being of human beings, an authentic potentiality for being in resonance with the world, others, and oneself. That’s what first needs to be “heard” down the path of a much needed future-based reform in academia: an uncanny feeling around our lostness in the mode of having knowledge which is calling forth what is possible, with and through knowledge, for the potentiality of being in higher education. And to all the realists who might fall prey to the temptation of asking for empirical proofs of such a call, I would like to simply say with Heidegger that “the demand for an ‘inductive, empirical proof’ for the ‘factuality’ of conscience and for the legitimacy of its ‘voice’ is based on an ontological distortion of the phenomenon. [...] The fact of conscience cannot be coupled with such proofs and counter-proofs at all. That is not a lack, but only the mark that identifies it as ontologically different in kind from things present in the surrounding world” (Ibid, 259).

Rather than asking for proof, I would invite the realists to simply listen: to listen authentically to their own experience and discover for themselves the limits of our current educational paradigm. This kind of listening will allow them to discover for themselves the potential contribution of ontological constructivism in overcoming those limits.

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