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The Importance of Values in the Constructivist Theory of Knowledge

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Abstract

The intended study is to reveal the importance of values in the process of constructing our implicit knowledge. There is a strong connection between emotions and knowledge and this relationship appears especially in the process of evaluation. Our approach describes knowledge as more intuitive and emotional and unconscious than is traditionally proclaimed. It serves especially practical and useful purpose and our former experience is its foundation. As we evaluate the world which we get to know, our system of knowledge contains also its meaning for us, our value system is hidden in it and it influences our further conduct. Our activity is the aim of our life, through which we cause changes in the world as well as in us.

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1. Introduction

During the long history of humankind, the image of a person has undergone several conceptual changes. Some periods considered a human being to be a part of a mythological world and a harmony with nature and good physical condition was crucial for him or her. Stories were told as the “study material” for children to learn to distinguish between good and bad. The endeavor to achieve harmony with nature and moreover with the universe, the universal energy, was found also in ancient India and China. There they accepted their existence with humility, and to lead a meaningful and useful life was the main aim. The point is that the following development somehow forgot that we

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are a part of the universe and interrupted the connections with it and moreover, the connection between our body and our mind was disturbed. Only in some people, this connection is preserved. Currently, especially since the second half of the last century, some groups of people have been trying to restore these lost connections. For example spiritualists, who proclaim that the only way is to connect to the universal consciousness. This is probably possible for some people but not for a whole humankind. The second way how to do it is through small steps slowly abandon the false views of a person seeing him or her as a mere component of a big machine, as one extreme, and the lord of nature, as the second. The first step is to restore the conception of a person as a unique, precious being, the unity of body and mind, the part of a nature and the universe, a holistic being, which by its activity causes changes outside but also inside of him or her. This single unique existence though possessing an innate base (e.g. temperament, emotionality, intelligence of a newborn child), changes every moment together with every decision made. Its transformation is therefore caused by us, and the outer conditions (the pressure of the environment) function only as a trigger for an action. But again, it is only us who chooses the response for a situation and by this transforms our personality.

Gestaltists say that the whole cannot be studied by its separate components. Also a person can be fully understood only as a whole and therefore, we should concentrate on how its once separately studied components function together. Our contribution to a holistic conception of a person enriches the theory unifying emotions and knowledge on the basis of the process of evaluation. Evaluation is in this paper considered to be inseparable from values and mental processes like cognition, learning or emotions. As Rokeach wrote “the value concept... (is) able to unify the apparently diverse interests of all the sciences concerned with human behavior” (Rokeach, 1973). Supported by this statement, we dare ask the question: Is not evaluation, understood as a person's reaction to a situation, common and very important problem of pedagogy, psychology, sociology and philosophy?

1.1. Constructivism

The intended study roots in the theory of Piaget, Dewey and others, who laid the foundations of a new way of thinking about the theory of knowledge. According to them, a person is not a mere passive storage of information but takes an active part in this process. According to the theory of evolution, organisms interact with the environment they live in. The interaction is mutual. An organism changes its surroundings and environment causes changes in an organism. Without the ability to adapt to changed conditions the organism would be condemned to death. This theory is applied to the development of human behavior. According to Dewey and later to Piaget (and others), human behavior is the response of an organism to changed conditions. Dewey stresses the act of transformation of conditions or environment by an individual, and claims that knowledge is the tool which serves for this purpose. In the school environment, pupils (students) learn by an experience which comes from their activity. They must not gain knowledge directly from a teacher as this would block their thinking (Dewey, 2001). Similarly, Piaget considers the development of cognitive processes as the highest form of our adaptation. This development is driven by the need of an organism to restore equilibrium. This can happen by assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1999). Here, we should emphasize that our knowledge is not a part of a real world but a mere schemes, thoughts, conceptions etc. produced by an organism, it is our transformation of reality, the reality how we see it. Bachelard enriched this theory by a piece of knowledge that these conceptions often contain false ideas which form a complex system themselves (Bachelard, 1940 in Bertrand, 1998). And although, it is not an easy process to alter them, we are to strive to subject our thoughts to a constant criticism. Vygotsky added a social function in the process of learning and his followers Brown and Collins even proclaimed that there is no individual intelligence as we have to take all possible sources of influence, like friends, family, teachers, books, films etc. into consideration (Brown, Collins, in Bruner, 1991).

There is no doubt that adaptation is a crucial process controlling an individual's life. What we should stress is that it is not the aim of an activity. It is only the driving force, which makes an individual act. The activity of an organism itself, on the contrary, is the aim, the sense of life, in which mental processes such as cognition, emotions, motivation, memory and learning and their connecting element evaluation are key factors. An organism must beat its desire to save as much energy as possible and act (perform, produce, transform, create something etc.). We construct our lives when we decide which activity we will choose.

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