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Ethics under the Aspect of Constructive Realism

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in Anerkennung
ihrer wertvollen Mitarbeit

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Preface

Ethics and Constructive realism have one aspect in common: both are dealing with the human activity. Maybe students of Constructive realism sometimes have got the impression that a possible connection between CR and ethics are artificial and leads only to confusion.

Who follows this way of thinking reduces the intellectual structure of constructive realism to a pure technical procedure. This would mean that we take out the constructive realism from the sphere of philosophy but this undertaking would destroy the central idea of CR.

Therefore, we must conceit that the constructive realism a philosophy of human actions as ethics offers philosophical discourses on the actions of human beings.

Under this aspect, it became more and more clear for me that we cannot exclude ethical reasoning from CR without destroying this philosophical concept.

This book shows a way to get both together.

Therefore, we discuss, in this book, ethical positions under the viewpoint of Constructive Realism. In the end of the book the reader will find what is unusual in philosophical books – a clear answer about the relation between CR and ethical positions and an explanation which type of ethics is going with CR and which types do not.

1. Self-Organization: Circularity as an Explanatory Principle?

Two attempts to overcome metaphysical realism

Maturana poses a multi-faceted challenge: to philosophy because of his consistent subjectivism, to epistemology because of his radical constructivism, and to biology because of his assessment of evolutionary theory and his concept of the nervous system. The claim behind his approach is no less than a redefinition of our conception of reality.

I do not want to interfere here in the discussion about Copernican turns, but I want to establish the reference to Kant. Kant's concept of the cognitive action turns the ideas of a representation of reality in the natural sciences upside down. It thus represents – as Vollmer has already seen – a Ptolemaic turn. Maturana consequently follows this path. For Kant places next to the spontaneity of the ego its receptivity and thus gives meaning to empiricism by putting it in its place. In this way, Kant creates the ambiguity that various authors – first and foremost Hegel – have criticized. Cognition gets into the ambiguity of, “made” and “experienced”. Admittedly, this seemed to trace the procedure of natural science as it was before Kant. This model also had a great influence on the interpretation of scientific methods and results up to the present: A modern adoption of this concept is the model of input and output.

In contrast, Maturana radicalizes the approach of the cognitive action. This is done by a new conception of the relation between subjectivity and world, with which a new conception of subjectivity is connected. We are only interested in the former for now. For Kant, the world has a double function: as an ontological presupposition and as a supplier of sensory data. In both respects, systematic uncertainties remain for Kant. The world as an ontological presupposition becomes the basic concept of the “thing-in-

itself”, which in turn can only be secured by a speculation that goes beyond cognition. The ontological quality of sensory data remains unclear, they most likely represent information in the sense of information theory. I.e., their cognitive content is reduced to the registerability.

We can understand Maturana’s approach as a reaction to these facts (although I am only concerned here with the systematic connections between two philosophemata, so I do not want to make any claims about the historical development of the autopoietic concept or even about Maturana’s intellectual biography). For Maturana, as for Kant, anthropological presuppositions play a role. But while for Kant the psychological distinction between spontaneity and receptivity is significant, Maturana starts from the conception of the nervous system as a closed system. Such a system cannot distinguish between internally and externally triggered changes in neural activity. Such a “distinction belongs exclusively to the domain of description of an observer in which inside and outside are defined for the nervous system and the organism” (Maturana 1982, p. 255).

The Kantian concept of spontaneity and receptivity is replaced by a concept of autopoiesis and allopoiesis. Allopoiesis, however, remains presupposed by autopoiesis. We see here the continuation of the Kantian approach of “I think, that all my ideas must be able to be accompanied by”. But this is concretized as a comprehensible process. Instead of the fact of consciousness, the inconceivable multiplicity of recursive processes is put. Thus the presuppositional structure of the world is disentangled: the ontological presupposition is not questioned, the epistemic presupposition of the world is renounced. The ontological presupposition is not treated as an epistemic problem. But it is nevertheless guaranteed, because it is “shown” by the failure of epistemic actions. Thus, it is possible to dispense with the postulate of the “thing-in-itself” without endangering the reality of the world.

The separation of autopoiesis and allopoiesis represents a proposed solution to the problem of receptivity and spontaneity. Allopoiesis presupposes autopoiesis ontologically and methodologically, autopoiesis presupposes allopoiesis epistemologically. That is, the allopoietic processes, as the descriptive processes, are not only exclusively possible in autopoietic systems, but perform themselves autopoietically. In this way, Maturana achieves that the cognitive domain of the observer is limited but unrestricted: “he can interact in an endlessly recursive way with representations of his interac-

tions, and through himself establish relations between otherwise independent domains” (Maturana 1982, p. 75).

This means that the “material of the senses” has lost its ambiguity as “given” and “given up”, it appears as resistance of cognitive actions. This, of course, at the price of the renunciation of the concept of truth in favor of viability.

Truth and Viability

For the replacement of truth – in the sense of metaphysical realism – with viability, three points of argumentation are offered: 1) the theory of evolution, 2) Falsificationism, and 3) the linguistic-philosophical turn in philosophy.

The relation to evolutionary theory is obvious, since the idea of viability is first of all an application of the evolutionist principle of fitness (“survival of the fittest”). But the difference to evolutionary epistemology becomes clear if we consider that Maturana’s constructivism does not claim to give a representation of the world. If this were merely an act of skeptical self-modesty, the contrast with evolutionary epistemology could be taken to the level of epistemological pessimism or optimism. It would then be rather uninteresting for epistemology. But the comparison has to be specified, considering that Maturana changes the level of argumentation with respect to the theory of evolution. Evolution requires reproduction, and reproduction requires the existence of a unit to be reproduced. Living systems as units, however, are defined by autopoiesis. “It follows that an adequate assessment of the variety of appearances of living systems, including their reproduction and evolution, presupposes their adequate analysis as autopoietic entities” (Maturana 1982, p. 200).

The approach *sub specie individui* changes the concept of cognition compared to the evolutionary theory of cognition. This could be explained from different points of view. We pick out the point of view of the distinction between “a priori” and “a posteriori”. From the point of view of evolutionary epistemology, “a systematics of individual aprioris can be developed, all of which are to be understood as a posteriori – learning products of our tribe” (Riedl 1987, p. 117) – as R. Riedl once stated. This is not a corrective

continuation of the Kantian concept of “a priori” and “a posteriori”, modified by empirical findings, but a reinterpretation of the Kantian concept of “Erkenntnis”. Kant was concerned with justifying cognition as knowledge by limiting its claim. He determined the fact of cognition in view of consciousness, which was not conceived as empirical, but as immediately given. It was about how cognition is possible, given that it is real. Here cognition is thought through the possibility of the self-reference of thinking.

Whether the circle of thinking presented here is allowed, shall not be discussed for the moment. But it must be stated that this circle does not claim to extend cognition. In contrast, evolutionary epistemology uses the Kantian figure of the recognizing of cognition (such a figure is e.g. the phylogenetic interpretation of the a priori).

Here, a change in the concept of cognition has emerged compared to Kant: Cognition is in the service of survival. I.e., cognition is no longer founded on knowledge. This is, of course, an assertion which the representatives of evolutionary epistemology will contradict. For by the biological foundation of epistemology the Kantian program of the foundation of insight from cognition seems to have been made explicit. But just in this explanation of the Kantian program the term “cognition” becomes equivocal to Kant’s way of using it.

This is related to the silent background of Kantian philosophy: His program is consistent only if transcendental I and thing-in-itself can be brought into relation. But to establish such a connection is only possible in two borderline cases: in the – unattainable – superpositionality over all subjects of cognition or in – ultimately – tautological (i.e. circular) assertions. That means that cognition – if at all – cannot be explained according to the method of explanations of nature.

The possibility of a circular upgrading of consciousness seized Hegel.

This possibly leads to the loss of the individual (I do not discuss this way of thinking further in our context). Another way is to make a virtue of the impossibility of superpositionality: this way was taken by the autopoietic approach. According to it, the Kantian approach of self-referentiality is realized in closed, individual systems. Without wanting to judge this procedure, we can recognize the tertium comparationis to the Kantian approach: It is the principle of closure – to use a formulation of H. v. Foerster (1982, p. 144ff.). In a more general formulation we can therefore say about the Kant-

ian and the autopoietic approach: they are – like mathematical constructs – characterized by coherence. Therefore, it can be said about them – in apparent paradox to the autopoietic claim – that they hold in every possible world. Therefore, for the autopoietic approach empirical findings of evolution have at best illustrative value: one can use them as a playground of the autopoietic concept. But they have no evidential value for this concept. Rather, the autopoietic approach claims the reverse course of the line of argumentation: Only the consideration of autopoietic systems makes representations of evolution comprehensible. Otherwise one commits a *petitio principii* and thereby gets into a circle of argumentation, which only leads to sham explanations. Its explanatory value would be on the level of the sentence “What survives, that lives”.

Before we present a differentiation between allowed and disallowed circle, we want to point out a methodological difference between evolutionary epistemology and autopoietic epistemology. Evolutionary epistemology is based on a belief we could call “theory of indirect knowledge”. According to it, the possibilities of the object of knowledge are reduced by the experiences of failure. This idea is also fundamental for Popper. However, he sees no contradiction between the theory of indirect cognition and the claim to realism and objectivity in science. The problematic underlying this, which also underlies evolutionary epistemology, was not sufficiently considered, because naturalistic epistemology and common-sense beliefs (such as realism) formed an alliance with each other. The common problem of autopoietic epistemology, falsificationism and evolutionary epistemology is that reality appears only in the sphere of the failure of a theorem. But if one invokes the contribution to knowledge made by the experience of the resistance of reality, one specifies the presuppositional structure of transcendental philosophy: the transcendental I, whose coincidence with the thing-in-itself is presupposed, is conceived as a system of finitely countable possibilities. With this, however, the central dilemma of Kantian epistemology, namely the claim of knowledge before knowledge, becomes virulent. However this may be solvable with respect to Kant himself, falsificationist epistemologies and those of “adaptation” make a presupposition which in any case does not result from the immediacy of “I think”. But if one, like the evolutionary epistemology, makes epistemic actions empirically ascertainable, one delivers oneself to the conditions of epistemological constructiv-

ism. This seems to be circular, as long as it is not merely an empirical research program for the description of certain cognitive achievements.

In my opinion, however, the autopoietic approach, in contrast to falsificationism and in parallel to the linguistic-philosophical turn, draws the consequences from the Kantian dilemma. If we now discuss autopoietism against the backdrop of Wittgenstein's philosophy, we do not intend to make a contribution to intellectual history, but to explore the structural possibilities and limits of autopoietic argumentation.

Circularity and Language

The tertium comparationis between Maturana and Wittgenstein's treatise lies in the closed system point of view – autopoiesis on the one hand, solipsism on the other. For both, language as a consensual domain had to be a particular challenge. – In our context, two sets of questions are particularly interesting:

1. How is language possible?
2. What is everything carried along or determined by language?

Ad 1) On the possibility of language

To the first question: To avoid misunderstandings: This is not a question about the phylogenetic development of language capability. Rather, what is at issue is how language can accomplish what we demand of it.

Maturana's claim for language is characterized by his concept of the closedness of the nervous system. It excludes the commonplace belief that language is primarily a means of transporting information. Such a concept – however modernly equipped – would presuppose a two-layer ontology: next to the generally binding reality a layer of meanings, the bindingness of which has been the central problem of traditional philosophies of language.

Radical subjectivism, however, takes another path of a highly demanding kind compared to traditional philosophy: It is taken seriously with the dependence of the conception of reality on language – which has already been asserted many times – in such a way that reality – in its full literal sense as structured reality – is itself generated by language actions. Thereby, how-