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Constructivism and Objectivism: Additional Questions

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Abstract

In past issues of The Educational Forum, David Elkind (2004; 2005) and Jamin Carson (2005) have engaged in a dialogue about constructivism and objectivism as viable philosophies of education. In this issue, yet another author joins in the discussion by questioning the role of science and religion in objectivism.

In his forcefully reasoned and articulate response to Elkind (2004), Carson (2005, 238), who maintains a strong objectivist stance, concluded that “there is no middle ground” between what he sees as the free-for-all of constructivism and the grounded reality of objectivism. I want to make it clear at the outset that I too find considerable flaws in constructivist pedagogy. It seems to me, however, that Carson did not consider several significant factors that have important implications in his argument—namely, the roles of quantum science and religions in the existence of an objective reality, and in defining what that reality is.

From a science perspective, Carson’s presentation did not appear to consider quantum physics. About this oversight, Greenstein and Zajonc (1997, 103) wrote, “Implicit in this position is an unstated assumption: the assumption that there is such a thing as an objective reality whose state we are trying to discover. On the surface, this assumption seems so obviously true that it seems silly to question it. However . . . it has been called into question by certain experiments.” If Carson’s level of reality is that which is only observable through our senses, he should make this explicit. Otherwise, he risks the appearance of “cherry-picking” science. It also must be noted that if “most people would disagree with such a statement or at least have difficulty accepting it” (Carson 2005, 236), this does not make a statement either unscientific or untrue—just as acceptance or agreement by most people does not make a statement scientific or true.

One also must explore the role of religion in affirming and defining an objective reality, especially because many proponents of objective reality and truth argue from religious perspectives. What, then, is the relationship between the objective truth and reality asserted by religion and that which is based on the scientific enterprise? How compatible are those realities and methodologies? That question has created considerable controversy in the pedagogical realm, as well as in the fields of religion and science. Moreover, which religion's truth or reality will prevail? For example, the nature of reality is perceived and understood very differently by a Zen Buddhist, a Roman Catholic, and a traditional Native American. Are there objective criteria by which one of these religions should trump the others? Should religious knowledge be considered "prior knowledge or cognitive structures" and, therefore, not a "subjective lens" (Carson 2005, 238)? Or, is religion indeed subjective and thus a lens in Carson's terms? Is it theory-laden? These controversies cannot be put to rest by a dismissive mention of an obvious straw man such as "sacrificing virgins to appease the gods" (Carson 2005, 236). Finally, is this not an area in which "the educator's metaphysical and epistemological assumptions" (Carson 2005, 235) play a major and perhaps decisive role?

Carson did not consider the roles of quantum science and religions in the existence of an objective reality, and in defining what that reality is.

I look forward to clarifications from Carson, as well as reflections from other respondents.

References

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