

From: Shotter, J. (2010) *Social Constructionism on the Edge: 'Witness'-thinking and Embodiment*. Chagrin Falls: Taos Institute Publications, pp.1-21.

## - Introduction -

### The Dynamic Background: its Chiasmic Structure

“You really could call it [i.e., a work of art], not exactly the expression of a feeling, but at least the expression of feeling, or felt expression. And you could say too that in so far as people understand it, they resonate in harmony with it, respond to it. You might say: the work of art does not aim to convey *something else*, just itself” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p.58).

“Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one might think” (Wittgenstein, 1953, no.527).

“I begin to understand a philosophy by feeling my way into its existential manner, by reproducing the tone and accent of the philosopher. In fact, every language conveys its own teaching and carries its meaning into the listener’s mind... There is thus, either in the man who listens or reads, or in the one who speaks or writes, a *thought in speech* the existence of which is unsuspected by intellectualism” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.179).

In what follows below, I want to explore how we can, from rare, unrepeatable, unique, fleeting, and utterly particular experiences, learn something general, something that we can carry across to other circumstances. Let me open my exploration by introducing six themes: As was perhaps already apparent in the Preface to this book, a central theme running through the whole of the work contained in it, is to do with how we might come to know a unique other or otherness *as unique*, as who or what they are *in themselves*. How can we “enter into’ *their* world in a way which acknowledges and respects their otherness, and allows them to express themselves to *us* in *their* terms? Or, to put it another way: How is it possible for a person (or a company, a situation, or whatever) to express their own unique individuality within a language made up, seemingly, of only a limited number of repeatable forms... or, for a work of art, to teach us a new way of looking at, or listening to, the world around us, a new *way* or *style* of looking or listening, a new sensibility?

This question is connected with another, a second theme, to do with how [end p.1] we might understand *change*: We are very used to talking of change as something that can be explained in terms of principles, rules, or conventions, of changes taking place *within* a reality already well-known to us, with what we might call *ordinary* changes. Here, however, I want to talk about surprising changes, changes that happen unexpectedly, changes that strike us with amazement or wonder, *extraordinary* changes, changes in the very character of what we take our reality to be – changes that Bakhtin (1993) calls “once-occurrent events of being.” In short, instead of changes of a quantitative and repeatable kind, I want to talk about first-time, unique, irreversible changes, novelties, changes of a *qualitative* kind.

A third theme of importance in all that follows is one which (strangely) focuses on something quite novel in our study of our own human affairs, a topic that, although it is quite well-known and familiar to us in an everyday sense, has not yet aroused in us any distinctive acknowledgment of its very special nature. This new topic is simply “life” or “livingness,” the properties, characteristics, or *aspects* of living, growing bodies, of organic forms as enduring, self-maintaining, self-reproducing, *structuring structures*. Thus, in all living activities, there is always a kind of *developmental continuity* involved in their unfolding, such that earlier phases of the activity are indicative of at least the *style*, the *physiognomy*, i.e., the unique living identity, of what is to come later. Thus, just as acorns only grow into oak trees and not rose bushes, and eggs only produce chickens and not rabbits, so all living activities, it seems, give rise to what we might call *identity preserving* changes or deformations – their possible ends are already ‘there’ in their beginnings.

A fourth consideration – arising out of the special nature of living things – is that everything of importance to us in this realm of spontaneous, living activity, occurs in *meetings* of one kind or another.

Something very special occurs when two or more living beings meet and begin to *respond* to each other (more happens than them merely having an *impact* on one another). [end p.2] As Wittgenstein (1953) puts it: “our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead, is not the same. All our reactions are different” (no.284). But more than this, there is the creation in such meetings of qualitatively new, quite novel and distinct forms of life, forms of life which are more than merely averaged or mixed versions of those already existing (see comments in the Preface), but which express quite unique, never-before-realized, *chiasmically* structured forms of dynamic unfolding.

Given these all these themes so far, let me try to sum up their influence by saying that, running through everything I have to say below, is a focus on *spontaneous, living, bodily, expressive and responsive activity*:

- *spontaneous*, because it is immediate and not pre-mediated;
- *living*, in that it has its existence only in a continuous responsive and adjustive relation with events occurring in its surroundings;
- *bodily*, in that it is not hidden inside individual people’s heads;
- *expressive*, in that it is a kind of activity that moves others to respond to it;
- and *responsive*, in that it occurs spontaneously in response to events having their source in the activities of the others and othernesses in its surroundings.

The power of living expression is that a person in their living activity can ‘call out’ a response from those around them, and in so doing, inaugurate a meeting, begin a new language-game. “The origin and primitive form of the language-game,” says Wittgenstein (1980a), “is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language - I want to say - is a refinement, ‘in the beginning was the deed’ [quoting Goethe]” (p.31). “The primitive reaction may have been a glance or a gesture, but it may also have been a word,” he notes (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.218). “But what is the word ‘primitive’ meant to say here?” he asks, (Wittgenstein, 1981). “Presumably that this sort of behavior is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based *on it*, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought” (no.541).

Now all these new foci of concern – understanding the unique otherness of the other; the power of extraordinary changes; the special nature of the “livingness” of some entities; the chiasmic structuring of living meetings; and the power of our living expressions – raise for me a fifth concern, a concern that seems to me to be of the utmost importance. It is to do with our taking into account what must be ‘already there’ in the background to our [end p.3] meetings, to make it possible for us to ‘go on’ with each other, to ‘follow’ each other without being misled, becoming disoriented or confused. It is this concern with the very present “background” that determines what it is possible for us to want and do, that takes us to the very edge of current versions of social constructionism. It is the nature is this background that I will turn to in just a moment as the central topic of this chapter. But first, let me mention a final theme: the importance of what we might call the *will* as distinct from the *intellect*.

This, then, is my sixth theme: Having focussed on the importance of events occurring in our *meetings*, it is also necessary to focus on the nature of people’s *initial stance or initial attitude* as they *approach* each other in such meetings. For these ‘set the scene’, so to speak, the ‘relational dimensions’, the ‘style’, the ‘way of going on’ for how participants will react to everything occurring within *the event of their meeting*. It clearly makes an enormous difference if we approach another person on meeting them with a clenched fist ready to strike, or with an open hand ready to shake their’s. And this initial approach is up to us, a matter of our choice, of our will. Indeed, as the interaction unfolds, if we use our judgment and allow ourselves to be appropriately responsive to their expressive movements, then we can ‘go on’ with them in an unconfused, straightforward manner.

In other words, as I made clear in the Prologue, Wittgenstein (1980a) draws our attention to the fact that there are *two* very different kinds of difficulties that we can face in our lives to do with not quite knowing what next to do for the best in our current circumstances: those of the intellect that we can formulate as *problems* and *solve* by reasoning, and those of the will that we experience as being disoriented or confused that can only be overcome by *resolving* on a line of action. Our ways of proceeding, our methods, or the steps we must take in relation to these two quite different kinds of difficulty, prior to acting, are also quite different, almost the opposite of each other in fact: For a difficulty to be called a *problem*, it must be possible to describe the initial state of affairs in such a detailed way that it can be fitted into an already well-known process of reasoning, thus to ‘work out’ a clear *solution*, that is, a clear set of links or connections between the initial conditions and the desired outcome. But a relational or orientational difficulty presents itself as almost the reverse of this situation for it is only *after* we discover a *way of relating* ourselves to our surroundings, a *way of*

*organizing* or *orienting* ourselves to attend to certain aspects of our surroundings rather than others, that a situation that was initially bewildering comes to take on a more well structured form. Our [end p.4] concern is with *resolving* on a line of action is thus similar, in this sense, to bringing a blurred image into a clear focus – the higher the ‘resolution’ of the lens, the more the light gathered. But the reference to light and to focusing, etc., here may be misleading. For Wittgenstein (1953) describes these kinds of *orientational difficulties* as giving rise to an experience within us of being ‘lost’: “I don’t know my way about” (no.123), where such difficulties are *not* overcome, he notes, by our being able to say, “Now I see it” (i.e., the solution to the problem), but by our being able to declare to others, “Now I know how to go on” (no.154). For, to ‘see’ something is simply to assimilate it to an already existing and well-known category – which in most practical situations means seeing it in relation to a pre-defined *ideal* and discounting all its small departures from that ideal. But to discount the often small deviations from what is already well-known to us, is often to discount what makes it the unique situation it is, thus to discount what we really need to attend to if we are in fact to come to know our way about within it. Wittgenstein (1953) criticized the seeming requirement we impose on ourselves prior to our investigations – for an *ideal* plan, theory, framework, or way of thinking (ideal in the sense of only detailing what is thought to be essential) – thus: “The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.)... We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!” (no.107). In other words, what some may think of as unimportant details, i.e., those who want to analyze a situation into its *countable* elements and to talk of its general nature intellectually, others, i.e., those more interested its unique nature and its articulation into a ‘landscape’ of inter-related features thus to know their ‘way about’ within it, find to be of crucial importance. Thus overcoming the difficulties we face in relating to the others around us in ways appropriate to us all working together effectively are of a quite different kind to those we face in doing science: While scientific objectivity requires us to talk of things in our surroundings as having a life of their own *independent of us*, our aim here must be to explore what is involved in things having a life of their own *in relation to us*. But how can we relate ourselves to them, how we can make the appropriate choices and judgments that make such a relation possible?

### **The background: chiasmic interweavings**

A first step is to try to understand the kinds of things our individual bodies automatically *do for us*, so to speak, without our having to exert much choice or intellection in the matter. Consider first just the simple activity of [end p.5] looking over, visually, the scene before us – with the aim in mind of readying ourselves to move about within it. As our eyes ‘flick’ from one fixation point to the next, looking at a distant point to the right, next at a near point to the left, with our two eyes working like the autofocus in an automatic camera – giving us a sense of ‘depth’ as they automatically find for us, at each moment, both a common point of fixation *and* a clear focus. Thus as our eyes dart about, we nonetheless get the sense of a seamless whole, an indivisible ‘something’ that is not just ‘there’ before us as a picture, but which is there before us as a set of ‘invitations’ and ‘resistances’, as a set of openings and barriers to our actions – in relation to our present ‘position’ within ‘it’. And furthermore, in such involvements as these, we can *all* – more or less – see the same whole, the same landscape, the same face, etc. So that, although I might look from the door on the left to see the window on the right, and you might look from the window on the right to see the door on the left, from within the overall time-space we both share, everything is similarly ordered. Thus if there are some disagreements over exactly what it is before us, we can make use of what we do agree on, to discuss the features we see differently.

And perhaps it is worth adding here, for future reference – as it will not have escaped notice that so far I am talking only of individual activities – that I can see the man over there looking over the same room or landscape as me. I can see the direction in which his head is pointing, I can see him turn it this way and that, I can see his concentration in his tense stance, I can see that he has seen me as he waves his hand toward me. That is, his responsive activities are in large part expressive for me. His seeing expresses something of his interest in the room or landscape to me. I approach him: “Beautiful, isn’t it?” I say. “What captured your attention?” “Oh, this is where I used to live,” he says, “I was looking at the changes!” Clearly, he can see ‘more’ than me. Perhaps he can tell me what he sees that I cannot.

What, then, is special in many of our individual bodily activities (but not in all), is that their responsive sequencing is expressive – not so much of how *we* order them – but of how a ‘something out there’ *requires* us to order them. If the separate elements we encounter in responsively relating ourselves to our surroundings unfold, not just haphazardly, but according to their own *character* or *style*, then they can give rise in all who

encounter them, i.e., prior to any thought or deliberation on their part, a *shared* (or at least *shareable*) background sense in terms of which our individual actions can, in such circumstances, have meanings intelligible to others.

This claim, that *the sequencing* of our individual human activities is not just formless, that not just anything can follow or be connected with anything, is clearly connected with Wittgenstein's (1953, 1974) claim, that most of our activities on investigation seem to have a "grammar" to them. It is this – our creative seeing in accord with what is 'out there', not the constraints passively imposed on us externally by a physical reality – that [end p.6] makes it impossible for us just to talk as we please: "Grammar is not accountable to any reality," he claims, "it is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary" (Wittgenstein, 1974, no.133, p.184).

In other words, because it is to an extent a matter of our *will* as to how we look over and choose to inter-relate and to respond to certain features of the scene before us, on the one hand, while on the other, we can only look *according to* the opportunities for looking afforded us by our surroundings, there must always be a *grammar* in our looking<sup>1</sup>. Due to the needs of our two eyes as we scan over a scene – the achievement of common points of fixation and focus – we cannot just look as we please. Yet we can adopt – as, for instance, with the well known faces-vase ambiguous figure – different *ways* or *strategies* of looking, so that as we scan from one point to another, we look with different sequences of anticipation and expectation in mind, e.g., we look down from what seems like a 'nose' region with the expectation of next seeing a 'chin', or, we look down from a seeming 'stem' region to an expected 'base' region of a vase. And to the extent that our expectations are satisfied, we see what is before us *as* a face, or *as* a vase. In other words, the grammar is 'there' in our living relations to our surroundings prior to any linguistic expressions we might apply there, yet due to our choice and judgment in the matter, the grammar in question is still, as Wittgenstein notes above, to an extent arbitrary.

Now to many, this may seem as outrageous a claim as the claim that there is no prior, already fixed and categorized physical reality to which to appeal in adjudicating the worth of our claims to truth. But it has at least the implication that, prior to any of the claims as to the nature of things and events in our surrounding that we might as individuals address to those around us, all such claims must be couched in a certain *shared style*. If they are not, then they will not be properly understood by those to whom they are addressed; they will be confusing or misleading. In other words, although there may be no prior criteria to which to appeal in judging *the truth* of a person's claims – for their truth must be investigated in terms of their entailments – there are criteria immediately available as to *their intelligibility* in the context of their utterance. These criteria arise out of the fact that all the elements involved are mutually determining, interwoven, or inter-related with each other in a certain way, according to a certain style or grammar.

But why should we call this kind of 'mutual determination' chiasmic? In choosing this term, I followed Merleau-Ponty (1968), who called the second to last chapter of his book *The Visible and Invisible* – Chapter 4 *The Intertwining - The Chiasm*. And then I want to add to that, the fact that both he (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1968) and Gregory Bateson (1979) take binocular vision as paradigmatic of the special nature of our living relations to our surroundings. To quote Bateson (1979): "The binocular image, which appears to be undivided, is in fact a complex synthesis of information from the left front in the right brain and a [end p.7] corresponding synthesis of material from the right front in the left brain... From this elaborate arrangement, two sorts of advantage accrue. The seer is able to improve resolution at edges and contrasts; and better able to read when the print is small or the illumination poor. More important, information about depth is created... In principle, extra "depth" in some metaphoric sense is to be expected whenever the information for the two descriptions is differently collected or differently coded" (pp.68-70).

In other words, much much more is happening here than the mere blending or interweaving of separate constituents which remain identifiably separate even when complexly interwoven. In our looking over a visual scene, in accord with the demands of the scene, *something utterly new and novel is being created*.

Indeed, something quite radical is entailed, as we shall see, in the recognition of the fact that our relations to our surroundings are not just simply relations of a causal kind, or of a systematic, logical or rational kind either, but are *living*, dynamic relations. In fact, although it may perhaps seem surprising to say it, I don't think that we have made a proper attempt at all – in either our ways of thinking and talking, or in our institutional

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<sup>1</sup> How it comes to be a shared grammar is a question for later consideration.

ways of relating ourselves practically to the others and othernesses in our surroundings – to acknowledge the fact of our *livingness*, and the fact that we live in surroundings that are *also living*. We still simply pre-suppose a non-living world of earth and rocks, of oceans and gases, to which we must simply adapt or die, a world which is just ‘there’ independently of our living participation within it, and to which we relate, officially, in only a dead, mechanical way.

The nearest we have got to taking life and living being seriously, is in our concern with “cognitive psychology” and a “philosophy of mind.” But even here, as you now all well know, we have assimilated our “mental lives” to the activity of digital computers, of dead mechanisms. While extremely clever and ingenious, however, this work is far from convincing. Most of us, despite the vehemence of the arguments presented to us, still feel far from spontaneously compelled, on entering our places of work in the morning, to greet our computers as we greet our colleagues – certain *responsive and expressive qualities* still seem to be lacking *in the movements* of their ‘bodies’. It makes no sense at all to talk in this responsive and expressive way of computers as having “bodies” at all.

### **Living expression: a new vocabulary of terms**

Indeed, in everything that I have to say here, I shall want, either explicitly or implicitly, to assume the *spontaneous, living, expressive-responsiveness of our bodies*, i.e., our ability to immediately and directly affect or ‘move’ the others around us, bodily in a meaningful fashion, and to be affected by [end p.8] them in the same fashion. And we can immediately note here, the *chiasmically organized nature* of the expressive-responsiveness of our bodies: for example, as I speak, you can see my body moving in synchrony with my voicing of my utterances, my hands in synchrony with my intoning of my words, my eye movements with my pauses, and my facial expressions with certain of my linguistic emphases – I shall use the word ‘orchestration’ to denote the unfolding structuring of these intricately timed, creative intertwinings and inweavings of the many inter-related participant parts or ‘bodily strands’ of our responsive-expressions.

1. *Orchestration*: But this term ‘orchestration’ – the attempt to capture in a form of words the whole notion of the chiasmically organized, *expressive-responsiveness of our bodily movements* – is just one of the new expressions we will find we need as we begin, seriously, to focus on life and on the activities of living beings. Indeed, I shall want to introduce to you a whole raft of radically new expressions to do with the nature of living responsive expressiveness.

2. *Physiognomic expressive*: Straightaway, let me add another: Instead of the kind of movements or changes we are used to – in which a set of separate elements of reality take up a sequence of different instantaneous configurations or positions in pace at different instants or moments of time – we must recognize the existence of self-sustaining, living unities, enduring through time. Such unities, rather than undergoing changes of place or position in space, exhibit expressive or *physiognomic* changes, dynamic changes within the boundaries of their growing and developing, self-sustaining bodies, short-term changes (as in facial expressions and bodily gestures) as well as long-term one’s in overall *style* which, as we will discover, are *expressive* in some way of events of importance their life. Indeed, although such physiognomic events are bodily events occurring out in the world observable to all, it is events of this *physiognomic expressive* kind that we take as indicative of a living being’s ‘inner’ or ‘mental’ life.

3. *Chiasmically-organized meetings*: But, to return once again to what seems to me to be the most unusual concern I want to introduce here: the importance of what occurs in the meetings between two of more individual forms of life, and the chiasmic organization of such meetings. For the complex, dynamically intertwined character of the living unities to which they give rise, cannot (as we shall see) be wholly captured in subjective nor in objective terms; neither are they wholly orderly nor wholly disorderly; nor need they in fact be constituted wholly from living components but may incorporate dead [end p.9] and inert parts in certain regions too.

Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) notes with respect to the nature of our chiasmically organized perception of our surroundings, that: “Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world. It is a marvel too little noticed that every movement of my eyes – even more, every displacement of my body – has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them, as, conversely, every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space. There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The

two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable” (p.134). Their relations to each other must be played out dynamically, over time.

In other words, to repeat the point made above, that the complex dynamic realities which here we are calling chiasmically organized, are not constituted from causally related parts, nor from any rationally related parts either, nor are they formed by an kind of mixing or blending or averaging we can imagine. The concept of chiasmic relations thus introduces a uniquely novel quality into our thinking of a previously unencountered kind.

4. *Primordial unities*: For these reasons, such living unities are best called *primordial*, not in the sense of being old or being located in the distant past, far from it, but in the sense of being the more richly intertwined origin or source from out of which we can differentiate our more focal concerns (our concerns with language and speech, for instance) – while at the same time also attending to the developing web or network of chiasmically intertwined relations, usually ignored in the background, within which our focal concerns actually have their being.

5. *New starting points or points of departure*: We can also call such meetings *primordial* in the sense that they are the basic units, the starting points, the living contexts within which we can situate everything that we take to be of importance to us in our inquiries below.

This claim has resonances for me with Wittgenstein’s (1980) claim, already mentioned above, that “the origin and primitive form of the language game is a reaction” (p.31). Where, as we already noted, what he means by the word “primitive” here, he notes elsewhere, is that “this sort of behavior is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based *on it*, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought” (Wittgenstein, 1981, no.541).

But it has resonances also with Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) search [end p.10] for a new, non-metaphysical starting point for philosophical inquiry: “If it is true,” he says, “that as soon as philosophy declares itself to be reflection or coincidence it prejudices what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition had provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have not yet been ‘worked over’, that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both ‘subject’ and ‘object’, both existence and essence, and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them” (p.131).

Indeed, as we continue, we shall find that many of our central, taken-for-granted concepts – especially those of space, time, matter, and motion (Capek, 1961) – will need re-consideration. All these issues and more will arise within my discussion of the new topic in western thought – of life and living beings. But for a moment, let us look at our current Cartesian assumptions.

#### **The classical world: a static pictorial world configured in terms of a set of separate ‘elements of reality’**

Why have we failed to acknowledge the distinct nature of life and living processes? Because, I think, to extent that we have attempted at all, we have attempted to take account of life and living processes by trying to *formulate scientific theories of them*. But this failure is not an intrinsic weakness or deficiency within the very idea of forms of inquiry aimed at achieving publicly shared and tested understandings, but – for reasons which will become apparent very shortly – to do with the requirement that such inquires into the nature of life and living processes be conducted in terms of *theoretical representations* of them. As Hertz (1954) put it, it is a process in which, “in endeavoring... to draw inferences as to the future from the past, we always adopt the following process. We form for ourselves images or symbols of external objects; and the form that we give them is such that the necessary consequents of the images in thought are always the images of the necessary consequents in nature of the things pictured” (p.1).

What Hertz sets out in detail here, then, are the general features of scientific *theories* – they are concerned with establishing repetitive patterns in formal structures, where the formal structures in question are set out in terms of instantaneous configurations of separately existing elements, which change by being reconfigured, instant-by-instant, into new configurations according to formal rules, laws, or principles. But it is impossible to do justice to living beings and living activities within such constraints.

For what we (or most of us) sense as distinct in life and in living phenomena, is to do with what is directly manifested within unfolding temporal relations occurring in events of a *physiognomic expressive* kind, and not at all to do with what can be argued from concatenations of instantaneous configurations of [end p.11] an otherwise unrelated collection of particles. Life is something that immediately ‘strikes’ us as such, not something some of us have accepted as an opinion, supported by arguments. Indeed, it is because all the approaches that count for us as *scientific* approaches to these problems inevitably allow *only* for what I am calling a Cartesian notion of change – a conception of change that inevitably, despite all our best intentions, ‘captures’ and ‘re-colonizes’ all our new ideas, and sets them back yet again within the old, dead and static world that we have tried to leave behind – that I want to discuss all these issues here today. For, embedded in our everyday ways of talking and conducting our relations with each other and the rest of our surroundings, are certain abstractions, certain concepts – in particular, as I indicated above, those of space, time, matter, and motion, inherited by us from the Greeks, but sharpened up for scientific purposes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, particularly by Descartes – it is these concepts of which we must now ‘cure’ ourselves.

Wittgenstein’s (1953) plaintive remark in this respect is well-known: “A *picture* held us captive,” he lamented, “and we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (no.115).

Thus the kind of progress he sought, was of a kind quite different from what many still see as scientific progress – if, that is, it must be conducted in *pictorial* terms. But it can be said that he still sought *enlightenment* (in Kant’s in 1784 sense) as a process that releases us from a state of ‘immaturity’, in which we are led by the authority of someone else’s opinions, when the use of our own capacity to reason is called for. To release us from our ‘bewitchment’ by Cartesian opinions, as to the proper ‘foundations’ for our claims to truth, he sought to re-introduce us, not to “any new information, but [to remind us of] what we have always known” (no.109). This is done, not by training us in any new “methods” of science, but by provoking us into adopting a “new attitude” toward our surroundings – where, by a “new attitude,” I mean here a new way of relating or orienting ourselves toward the others and othernesses around us. Rather than distancing ourselves from them, with the aim of mastering and possessing them, our new task is that of being merely *participants* in a larger whole. Our new attitude thus presents itself to us both as a task and a question, the question as to exactly what is the nature of our belonging. A bit, no doubt, what it was like for the Greeks to be involved in what they called an *ethos*...

In his new task, then, Wittgenstein (1953) saw enlightenment as simply noticing and acknowledging – and offering for our acknowledgment – a whole range of inter-connected phenomena that had not before been noticed. And one thing he brought to our notice, is that there is something very special about living, human bodies. In exploring the question: “What gives us *so much as the idea* that living beings, things, can feel?” (no.283), he went on (here and in other explorations) to fix on our spontaneous, [end p.12] unthinking, bodily reactions to events occurring around us as basic, our being ‘struck’ by something, as the crucial points of departure for the new philosophical methods he wanted to introduce to us – methods aimed at releasing us, as mentioned above, from authorities external and prior to those relevant in the circumstances of our current involvement. What should we notice about the difference for us between dead and living things? “Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead,” he notes, “is not the same. All our reactions are different” (no.284).

And they are *really* different. Here, Wittgenstein’s (1953) insistence on the primacy of our spontaneous, unthinking responses to events occurring around us comes to the fore. Whether we see something as a living thing or not, was not, for Descartes, a matter of our immediate bodily response to it, but a cognitive matter, something we had to ‘work out’. As he suggested: “If I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves... Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind” (Descartes, 1968, p.21)<sup>2</sup>. Wittgenstein’s insistence, that we begin with our actual reactions and responses to events, not with speculations and theories – that must “let the use of words teach you their meaning” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.220)

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<sup>2</sup> “But can’t I imagine that the people around me are automata...?” Says Wittgenstein (1953), “Say to yourself, for example: ‘The children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism’. And you will either find these words become quite meaningless; or, you will produce in yourself some kind of uncanny feeling, or something of the sort” (no.420). Clearly, Descartes felt no such linguistic difficulties as these, as one doesn’t in, so to speak, in talking solely to oneself.

– that allows at last to begin to respond adequately to living events, to living activities.

In a moment, then, I want to explore further the new beginnings offered us by Wittgenstein. But before I do, I must go more deeply into the Cartesian concepts still unnoticed and unremittingly active in the background to everything we currently do and say, not only in our everyday activities but also in our intellectual inquiries – even when we think of ourselves as being especially vigilant. Let me highlight here the one I take to be central. “Promising deep and effective knowledge of the natural world, Descartes’s philosophy held out the great hope that: “...knowing the force and the actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all other bodies that surround us. ..we should be able to utilize them for all the uses to which they are suited and thus render ourselves masters and possessors of nature” (Descartes, 1968, p.74).

In other words, instead of victims, we can become masters of our fates. Prior to Descartes, everything in the cosmos was characterized by greater or lesser degrees of value, of perfection according to a hierarchical scheme with matter at its foot and God at its summit. By excluding values and reducing everything tangible to matter in motion according to [end p.13] mathematically expressible laws, Descartes destroyed the older notions of the cosmos. God is no longer present in the world, nor for that matter is man, in the sense of having any obvious place assigned there for his own self. As a mind, quite separate from the world as matter, the role of man himself can only be that of dominating his surroundings and becoming master and possessor of the natural world, utilizing it for all the uses to which it is suited. And that world itself, containing as it does only matter in lawful and orderly motion, becomes, as we shall see, both a timeless and lifeless place.

If we are ever to study ourselves without emasculating ourselves in the process – without destroying our own ability to transform ourselves – it is Descartes’s account of our being in the world (his ontology) and the accounts of how we came to know its nature (his epistemology) that we must replace<sup>3</sup>. For, although we may have had quite a number of very new thoughts about the creative, constructive nature of our relations to the others and othernesses around us, it is still in terms of the same basic concepts of space and time, and of matter and motion, that inherited from Descartes, that we have been trying to express these new thoughts.

We can get a sense of what these basic concepts are from Descartes’s (1968) own account of our world in his view. He sets it out as follows: “In order to put these truths in a less crude light and to be able to say more freely what I think about them, without being obliged to accept or to refute what are accepted opinions among philosophers and theologians, I resolved to leave all these people to their disputes, and to speak only of what would happen in a new world, if God were to create, somewhere in imaginary space, enough matter to compose it, and if he were to agitate diversely and confusedly the different parts of this matter, so that he created a chaos as disordered as the poets could ever imagine, and afterwards did no more than to lend his usual preserving action to nature, and to let her act according to his established laws” (p.62).

In other words, Descartes sets out here, not a living world, not a growing or developing world, existing in the cosmos as a complex, internally inter-related, indivisible unity with continuously emergent, uniquely new aspects and characteristics, but a world made up of a fixed number of separately existing particles of matter in motion, which, at any chosen instant in time, can simply take on a new configuration.

### **Towards an orchestrated, indivisible world of ‘invisible presences’**

In other words, as I mentioned above, to the extent that it contains nothing else but a *limited* set of particles of matter in orderly motion, such a world [end p.14] is both lifeless (as matter cannot be created *ex nihilo*), and, because it is possible for such a limited amount of matter to reappear in the same configuration – to repeat itself, so to speak – a timeless place. Indeed, in such a world, as Laplace (1886) realized, an intellect that was vast enough, could, by knowing the position and velocities of all these basic particles, “embrace in the same formula the motions of the greatest bodies in the universe and those of the slightest atoms; [and as result] nothing would be uncertain for it, and the future, like the past, would be present to its eyes.” In such a world as this, all change would only be of a quantitative nature, changes of configuration; there can be no qualitative changes, no creation of novelty, no unique, first-time occurrences, no events which could, like works of art (Wittgenstein, 1980, p.58), have their unique meaning *in themselves*.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Shotter (1974, p.53).

Here, then, we have a basic set of concepts – of space and time, and of matter and motion – in terms of which we in fact conduct almost all our daily enterprises. This the *picture* currently holding us captive, for this is what lies in our language and what we repeat to ourselves inexorably, in our ordinary daily activities, in our institutional and administrative practices, and in our intellectual inquiries. Indeed, it is a picture of the world *as a picture* (a ‘pointillist’ picture, in fact) – “we are indicating by the very choice of the word its most significant feature: its *pictorial* character” (Capek, 1961)<sup>4</sup>.

Indeed, we can now see why those versions of social constructionism which leave this Cartesian picture in place, raise so much anxiety over their deconstruction of everything that seems fixed and solid within it<sup>5</sup>. For a background that has been decomposed into “a chaos as disordered as the poets could ever imagine,” cannot exert any structured or guiding influence of a shared kind on those immersed in it.

But notice its origins, note Descartes’s relation to his surroundings from within which he fashions this ‘view’: he fashions it as a thinker, and as a deliberate, self-conscious actor. He is not a participant in any ongoing practical action, concerned to engage with and make himself understood in the action, to the others around him; he never acts spontaneously, in responsive reaction to events occurring around him; he is acting alone, deliberately concerned with being the master and possessor of nature.

Indeed, whatever the movements of those he observed “crossing the [end p.15] square,” he is unmoved or untouched by them. Should one of them turn to catch sight of him at his window, how would he react, how would he respond? For, the meeting of people’s eyes, our eyes with those of animals... the spontaneous “interplay of gaze and expression” (Sacks, 1985, p.8)... is something very basic in our lives. Spontaneously, we sense ourselves as in contact with more than just a dead body in motion; we have become involved with a being that has a soul, an ‘inner life’; and we know straightaway if they have that same attitude toward us. As Goffman (1967) points out, our’s and other people’s sense of offence is direct and immediate if we feel those around us are not properly honoring their “involvement obligations.” “My attitude towards him,” says Wittgenstein (1953), “is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul” (p.178).

If we attend, then, to the kind of meeting occurring between Descartes and his surroundings, the relations between them, we find them somewhat distant. The surroundings that concern him are ‘over there’; it is an ‘external world’; he is not himself *a participant* within it – he is merely thinking of himself as ‘viewing’ it. Thus in this ‘thought-view’<sup>6</sup>, space is holds a privileged place, and it is treated as an immutable, unchanging, homogeneous, causally inert, empty ‘container’, a place in which separate ‘particles’ of matter may occupy different ‘positions’. Time is secondary to space, and often thought of as a fourth, ‘spatial’ dimension. As such, it too is an empty, neutral, unchanging ‘container’. While instants *of* time are differentiated by their succession, time is prior to change: changes occur *in* time. As unchanging containers, both space and time are there for things to happen in them. The only changeable stuff is matter, not within itself, but in its location; it may change its position in space – hence our feeling that what is of central importance for us, are static *structures* – or our linguistic *representations* or our ways of *picturing* such structures in language – in making sense between us of what counts for us as our world.

But let us note again, that this kind of world is not the world that contains us as active *participants* within it, the world in which we, along with the others and othernesses around us, have our being within a dynamic interplay involving us all. It is, to repeat, the world of an individual who has withdrawn himself from such shared participatory involvements, and who has turned himself instead only toward the aims of mastery and possession. Thus for such an individual, this is an ‘external world’, a world in which time has been ‘spatialized’

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<sup>4</sup> See also Heidegger (1977), *The age of the world picture*. As Heidegger remarks there, the term “world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture” (p.129).

<sup>5</sup> “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed one become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face.. The real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men” (Marx, MER, 475-76, quoted in Berman, 1982, p.21).

<sup>6</sup> In actual vision, we do not see *separate, independent, elements of reality*; in fact, in ‘pointillism’, dynamic *chaismic* relations emerge as we look over the points of paint to create a ‘luminous’ effects.

as merely another spatial dimension, i.e. as an already existing dimension of reality in which the future positions of the particles making up a configurations 'await', so to speak, occupation. It is thus 'natural' in such a reality, to think of motion as following a path in space, a space which 'there' both before and after the motion. [end p.16]

But in the dynamic time of life and living, in irreversible time in which things grow and develop, internally articulate and refine themselves, flower, blossom, and reproduce themselves in others of their kind, and then die, in this kind of time, movement and motion cannot simply be a change in position in a pre-existing space. Motion is to do with the creation of novelty; it is *physiognomic*, in that it is an "organic deformation" (Whitehead, 1975, p.160), or "coherent deformation" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.91), i.e., a qualitative change *within* a living whole. And what is special about such living wholes – even such entities as paintings, pieces of music, or written texts – is that just like the other persons around us, they can have *agency*, that is, they can exert an influence on us through their *expressions*; not the direct impact of a physical force, but the kind of influence another can exert on us by, for instance, calling our name, the kind of influence that plays upon our inescapable responsiveness as living beings to events of concern to us occurring in our surroundings. It is in this kind of world in which we live and participate.

### The 'agency' of real but invisible presences

But how shall we talk of it, how shall we – not *picture it or view it*, for that again will lead us back into all the difficulties of timelessness we must avoid – but, *express a sense of it* in some way? And what does it mean to say that such a world is populated with *agencies* over and above the individual agencies of the individual people around us? How can something like a text – that seems to be a dead thing in itself – exert an invisible influence upon us? What does it mean to talk of the *real but invisible presences* influencing the *style* of our lives at the moment, to talk, say, of the current 'grammar' of our language, or of what it is like to have to live, currently, in what we might call 'the age of money'?

Well, strangely, there is no shortage of familiar, everyday activities, *which only take place over time*, to which we can refer as paradigms in orienting ourselves as to what is entailed in identifying the nature of *felt understandings*, what it is to have a *shaped and vectored sense* of a circumstance without in fact having a visual or pictorial image of it. Consider, for instance, the simply activity of another asking a question to us; or listening to a piece of music.

Let us take the last example first, consider a simple melody unfolding in time: The first point to make, is about its *successive* nature, and the sharp distinction between the *internal relations* involved in an unfolding temporal succession and the *external relations* constituting a structure formed by juxtaposing a set of parts in space. As long as its 'movement' continues, the [end p.17] musical expression remains incomplete. At each particular moment a new tone is added to the previous ones, or more accurately, each new moment is constituted by the creation of a new musical *quality*. A picture, a spatial array contemplated at any given instant is complete, it is a *static* structure with all its parts are given *at once*, simultaneously. Our experience in listening to a piece of music is very different. In spite of the irreducible individuality of each new tone, its *quality* is 'tinged' or 'colored' by the whole preceding musical context into which its 'strikes', and which in turn, its retroactively changes by contributing to the emergence of a new musical quality.

The 'building' or 'construction' of a musical phrase over time is thus very different from the construction of a structure in space. Even the most complex of 'man-made' systems, machines for instance, are constructed piece by piece from objective parts; that is, from parts which retain their character unchanged irrespective of whether they are parts of the system or not – this is what is meant by saying that they are *static* structures constructed from *externally* related parts. Such structures only have their character when they are complete: we put in the last engine part, switch on, and drive away; any attempt to drive a car before all its parts have been installed is the court disaster. But in something like a piece of music, all its 'participant parts' all have a *living* relation with each other; that is, as we noted above, they constitute a *dynamically* emerging or *growing* structure, a *structuring structure* one might say. As such, they develop from simple, already living individuals, into richly structured ones – they do not have to wait until they are complete before they can express themselves. They develop in such a way that their 'parts' (if we are still justified in using such a term?) at any one moment in time, owe not just their character but their very existence both to one another *and* to their relations with the 'parts' of the whole at some earlier point in time. In other words, their *history* – i.e., where they have come from and where they have been headed – is just as important as the instantaneous logic, in their growth.

Consider again a piece of music: as we have noted, while the individual tones are not externally related units from which the melody is additively built, their individuality is not simply absorbed or dissolved in the undifferentiated unity of the musical whole. Each individual tone matters, makes a difference while being related to the whole. Thus, the musical phrase is a *successively differentiated whole* which, remains a whole in spite of its successive character, and which remains differentiated in spite of its dynamic wholeness. In other words, as a dynamic whole, it resists description in terms of any one *single order of connectedness* – hence my comment above, that we might designate such living wholes as *primordial*, in the sense of being the richly intertwined origins or sources from out of which we can differentiate our more ordered concerns – while at the same time being able to attend to the web of chiasmically intertwined relations within which they have their being.

The pressure to form *theoretical pictures* (as in Hertz's account of the proper way of proceeding in science) leads us to forget the essential difference [end p.18] between the juxtaposition of parts in space, and the unfolding succession of qualities in time, and to reduce the differences between the past, present, and future to simple *differences of position*: 'past' events being symbolized by positions lying to the left of the point representing the 'present', while 'future' events lie to the right of the same point on an already existing 'time line' drawn in space.

Turning to our first example, consider now the possible (somewhat over complicated) exam question: "What are the differences between Gergen's and Shotter's versions of social constructionism, considering that Gergen developed his version in an American background in objection to experimental *social* psychology, while Shotter developed his in a British context, not only in objection to the experimental approach to *developmental* psychology, but also in objection to the whole idea that human behavior could ever be likened merely to computation and understood in *formal*<sup>7</sup> terms?"

Before attempting to articulate what is involved in our answering such a question, let me introduce a piece of orienting material: George Mead's (1934) claim that: "The mechanism of meaning is present in the social act before the emergence of consciousness or awareness of meaning occurs. The act or adjustive response of the second organism gives to the gesture of the first organism the meaning it has" (pp 77-78). I quote this to make the point, already made by Wittgenstein above, that meaning begins with our spontaneous responsive reactions. Such reactions can be thought of as beginning a sequential process of differentiation, of specification, of making something within a still undifferentiated array of possibilities clear and distinct – while still, of course, embedded within that same array. We can now turn toward what might be involved in our attempts to 'answer' the question.

While we hold the question 'in mind', so to speak, as 'point of orientation' as we try mentally to assemble the landscape within which we are going to attempt to answer it. While not being able to articulate its influence, we keep 'hearing its voice' and 'answering to' its calls. It works as both a provocation and a guide. In the jargon I have been using currently, it provides us with a shaped and vectored sense of the landscape in which we must make our 'moves' if we are to respond to the questioner as he or she already anticipates and expects. For there is in the very asking of the question in those terms a veritable grammar determining what will count as an acceptable answer or not. In other words, prior to us having any clear conscious awareness of events our surroundings exerting specific, describable influences on our conduct, such influences are there (as Mead puts it) "before the emergence of consciousness or awareness of meaning occurs," and we crucially need to take note of this. [end p.19]

## Conclusions

What I have been arguing above, then, is that previous accounts of social constructionism have been nowhere near radical enough. Embedded in the background against which many of the arguments in their support are formulated, is an unexamined Cartesianism. As a consequence, although they have directed our attention away from supposed events occurring in people's heads and toward events occurring out in the world between them, they did not overcome the idea of our social realities being composed of a limited set of separate "elements of

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<sup>7</sup> An early (1969) unpublished, mimeographed paper of mine was called: "Objections to the idea that everything essential to the understanding of human behavior can be formalized," available on: <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~jds/OBJECTIONS.htm>

reality.” As a result, in many what I will call *linguistic* versions of social constructionism, it seems as if there are no prior connections or relations between the elements that might go into a construction. Hence the relativistic claim that ‘anything goes’.

However, if what I have argued above is the case, then there are shared, foundational, “forms of life” to be found *within* our meetings. So, although we can agree that there need be no fixed forms of understanding prior to our meetings, the fact is that a shared background structure of feelings of anticipation and tendency can be created in those moments when one living being acknowledges the presence of another. If it were not so, then there could be no shared judgments in terms of which to form agreements at all. And this is clearly not the case.

But, what exactly is the reality in which we live? Like St Augustine, when asked about time, we know perfectly well in our everyday practices what it is, most of the time – else we would spend even more of our time in chaos and confusion than we do – is only when we try to formulate its nature that we run into trouble. From what we have discovered above, we know that it cannot be pictorial, i.e., it cannot be made up of patterns of static forms that can be visibly put down on a page. Here, due to recent new understandings of the nature of language provided us by Wittgenstein, Vygotsky, Voloshinov, Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty, etc, we are coming to grasp the nature of our own, self-generated confusion. We now realize, for instance, in our study of language, that as soon as we shift our attention from our actual experience of “words in their speaking” to the *patterns* of “already spoken words,” the static shapes and forms we put down on a page – that is, we shift our attention from the living movement of a temporally developing whole to its static, *pictorial representation* – such self-generated confusion is inevitable. Disciplined to think logically, in terms of static forms and patterns, to think that geometry and arithmetic and other forms of calculation are the only properly disciplined modes of thought, we have given ourselves over to the authority of single, hierarchically structured forms of disengaged thought.

Here, however, I have begun to explore what is involved in disciplining ourselves to think in a different, engaged, fashion – in a way which follows the contours, so to speak, of the shaped and vectored sense one has of the [end p.20] particular situations in which one might find oneself embedded *in one’s meetings with others*.

*Dynamic chiasmically-organized wholes:* Like any dynamic whole, the *reality* created within such meetings will exhibit a synthesis of unity and multiplicity, of continuity and discontinuity; but it cannot be the unity of an undifferentiated, instantaneous spatial whole, nor can it be a plurality of merely juxtaposed units. Further, although it has continuity, it lacks continuity in the mathematical sense of infinite divisibility (for many of the phenomena important to us are only realized over a certain period of time), but it certainly doesn’t have the discontinuity of self-contained, rigid, atomic particles. Its continuity is of a chronotopic kind, of a time-space kind, but quite what that *is* remains, perhaps, open to further articulation – in other words, I cannot claim here by any means to have given a definitive account of chiasmically organized realities.

*Languaged realities:* The positive significance of our “turn to language” in social constructionism, is not just in the way in which it has released us from the need to give prior (foundational) justifications for all our claims, but for the ways in which it has begun to orient us toward our experience of *word use*, and in particular, toward our detailed sensing of the temporally unfolding experience of the *chiasmic* interweaving of our voicing of our words in with the events occurring at the moment of their voicing. This has led some of us right away from abstract theorizing, to the discovery of the *nonvisual dynamical patterns* actually occurring with us as we speak and listen. Thus, rather than merely gaining a sense of that reality over there from a set of pictures that we might view in an art gallery without ever going out into the actual world at large, the *nonvisual dynamical patterns* that we can come to embody, in following Wittgenstein’s methods, can help us in actual fact to come to be more ‘at home’ in our own human world.

*Living, embodied, expressive-responsiveness:* we must not ignore the *spontaneous, living, expressive-responsiveness of our bodies*, i.e., our ability to immediately and directly affect or ‘move’ the others around us, bodily in a meaningful fashion, and to be affected by them in the same fashion. Our living, bodily embedding in this previously unnoticed background, and the ways in which it both ‘calls out’ expressive-responses from us while utterly ‘disallowing’ or ‘repulsing’ others, has been too much ignored in all our approaches in Social Theory, social constructionism included. As I noted above, it is the *chiasmically organized nature* of the spontaneous, expressive-responsiveness of our living bodies that is the ‘background glue’ holding us together in all our relationships. And it is the ‘orchestration’ of these intricately timed, creative intertwinings and inweavings of the many inter-related ‘strands’ of our responsive-expressions that we must study – for its ‘in’ their interweaving that we can find the new openings, the new possibilities we need to discover, if we are to develop our relational abilities further. [end p.21]

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