Some Early Thoughts on Experiential Realism[1]

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[1] This was written during dissertation days and in the post-cultural studies backlash phase of my life. My desire was to explore a rabid extreme to the social construction of reality view of the world. I had to cure myself from the neural damage that pomo inflicted on my unsuspecting and naively trusting mind. Experiential realism was that cure but as always "your mileage may vary" and "past results are no guarantee of future performances".

The primary purpose of this paper is to present a philosophical perspective termed experiential realism. The philosophical perspective of experiential realism builds upon Searle's version of "external realism".

1. Experiential Realism

In this section, I will explicitly state the philosophical perspective of experiential realism. Building from Searle (1999, pp. 9-10), I hold the "default positions" on realism [external, perceptual, causal, linguistic, scientific, social, mathematical], moral "anti-anti-relativism" and spiritual monism. These default positions are integrated into the conceptual framework of experiential realism. Each of the elements of the experiential realism framework are discussed below.

1.1 External Realism

There exits a physical world "out there". This world is independent of my biological being, my phenomenological experiences, my conceptual thoughts and my linguistic competencies and performances. In other words, the reality of external world is not predicated upon my subjective experience.

1.2 Perceptual Realism

I have direct epistemic access to this external world through my perception. Perception includes my five senses- vision, hearing, touch, smell and taste. It is in this sense, that I understand Gibson's (1979) affordances and his insightful notion of "direct perception".

1.3 Causal Realism

Causality is a fundamentally real relation between entities and events in the world. As every good empiricist knows, correlation doesn't entail causality but radical skepticism doesn't follow from that fact. For example, the two hypothetical events of (a) my consistent non-payment of rent and (b) my eventual-eviction fro my rented apartment would not be a mere empirical correlation. They would be causally connected in a real social world.

1.4 Linguistic Realism

Human syntactic language is *both* a biological reality (after Chomsky's generative linguistics, see Joseph, Love, & Taylor, 2001a; also see Pinker, 2000 for a statement on human language as a species-specific biological instinct) *and* a social reality (after Labov's socio-linguistics, see Joseph, Love, & Taylor, 2001b). Words have approximately real meanings in everyday language. As such, words can be cognitively processed (Chomsky's "competence") and socially used (the later Wittgenstein's insistence, Chomsky's "performance") to refer to objects and subjects in the real world.

1.5 Scientific Realism

There is a real world independent of the last human observer to which scientific facts correspond to. Scientific facts are not socially invented. Many social studies of scientific work spawned by the influential work of Latour and Woolgar (1979) have devolved into arguing that scientific facts are socially constructed and therefore they are made up by the minds. The fashionable term for this reckless sophistry is "Social Constructionism". Social construct*ionism* is not to be confused with the social construct*ivism* of learning sciences. You cannot socially construct a scientific fact that says gravity is repulsive without sustaining it with a scientific proof that requires other scientific facts. Showing that these proof conditions are socially mediated doesn't mean that the truth of the scientific facts is also socially determined. Social mediation is not social determination in the case of scientific facts (after Searle, 1984). Proponents who argue otherwise usually prop up Kuhn (Kuhn, 1996) who highlighted the social side of things while ignoring Popper's crucial contributions to the epistemology of scientific work (Popper, 2002a, 2002b)

Hacking's (1999) brilliant book, appropriately titled *"The Social Construction of What?"* offers a balanced scholarly analysis of the debates centered around the reality of scientific facts and their social construction. Ethnographic observation of a scientific space can provide a "thick description" and generate a thorough explanation of the social workings of science. However, irrespective of their comprehensive description of the social setting or the exhaustive explanation of social interaction, such social studies of scientific activity cannot explain the logical correspondence of scientific facts to an external reality. To state differently, a social study of the discovery/manufacture of the light bulb, cannot make statements about the reality of the scientific facts about light. That light bulbs are socially constructed is a trivial truth in the end as the argument is tautological. Latour and Woolgar (1979, 1986) themselves have dropped the word "social" from "social construction" for the second edition of their book acknowledging the often radically incorrect implications attributed to their seminal work. Human beings are social animals and therefore all of human enterprises are irreducibly social. This has huge analytical value in certain strands of critical social theory that seek to explain the social construction of gender and race (Hacking, 1999) for disabusing ourselves of our prejudices.

In my opinion, sincere students of science should thoroughly rid themselves of the notion that scientific facts are merely social fictions of scientists with vested social interests. Etymologically, fiction comes from the Latin "*fingere*": to form; to create (Wikipedia, 2006). It is in this sense and only in this restricted sense that scientific facts are social fictions; they are made by socially situated embodied minds. But these scientific facts are always made with reference to an external reality; they are grounded in an objective world despite the intersubjective conditions of their proof conditions. Nature participates in the proof conditions of scientific facts made by human cultural groups. For a thorough synthesis of different disciplinary studies into scientific discovery, see Klahr and Simon (1999). This external reality is constituted by a mental space, a physical space or a social space (Lefebvre, 1991 see pp.1-14). Building upon Lefebvre's revolutionary work into "the production of space" (cited above), I will propose in section 2.5.5 that scientific facts can correspond to any one of a quartet of real spaces- ecological, social, cognitive and affective.

1.6 Social Realism

Following Durkheim, I hold that social facts are real.

> A social fact is to be recognized by the power of external coercion which it exercises or is capable of exercising over individuals, and the presence of this power may be recognize in its turn either by the existence of some specific

> sanction or by the resistance offered against every individual effort that tends to violate it. (Durkheim, 2000/1895, p. 92)

> A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestation. (Durkheim, 2000/1895, p. 93)

After Sawyer (2004), I hold that emergent social properties are also real. This position is crucial for my conception of learning as a social properties emerging from entwined intersubjective and interactional processes. Social facts in education like socio-economic status (SES) can have causal influences on the assessment of the emergent properties of learning.

Social facts cannot be reduced to 'individual' consciousness or phenomena. They are external to the individual and endowed with coercive power, that is, social constraints. Social facts, as ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, are different from biological or psychological phenomena. They consist of established beliefs and practices, some social organizations, and even social currents. Social facts can only be explained by other social facts. The "rules for the explanation of the social facts" are explained below

> **The determining cause of a social fact should be among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness.** Moreover, we see quite readily that all the foregoing applies to the determination of the function as well as the cause of phenomena. The function of a social fact cannot be but social, ie., it consists of the production of socially useful effects...The function of a social fact ought always to be sought in its relation to some social end.(Durkheim, 1998/1895, pp. 244-5) [emphasis mine]

I depart from Durkheim (cited above) on the insistence that that social facts don't admit explanation by scientific facts related to individual consciousness. I am not arguing for a reduction of social facts to scientific facts but that social phenomena do derive their causal power from individual embodied minds that are socially situated.

1.7 Moral "Anti-Anti-Relativism"

Education is a thoroughly moral enterprise. It was Dewey who highlighted the importance of experience for education without equating the two. As such, teaching and instruction involve making pedagogical commitments that are informed by both scientific facts and social facts. The mutual interdependence between these two is a starting point for an ethical perspective in education. After Geertz (1984; see also Shweder, 2000) I take an anti-anti moral relativism stance in that I hold on to a social version of cultural relativism but not to the scientific version of cultural relativism.

1.8 Mathematical Realism

After Plato, I hold onto a platonic realm of ideal forms with respective to mathematics. It is tough for me to imagine a humanist quest for perfection in social life, scientific life, political life and ethical life without some commitment to at least a mathematical ideal form that resides in that utopian future. As far as I know, the platonic concept of an ideal circle can be *mathematically* expressed in many ways, as a

system of curves in a 2-dimensional Euclidian geometrical plane [$(x - h)^2 + (y - k)^2 = r^2$, center at (h,k) and magnitude of radius = r), as the locus equidistant from the center, the resultant of a plane intersecting a right circular cone parallel to the base and finally as a perceptual external representation drawn by an embodied mind with a mechanical compass. In my limited understanding of mathematics, it is difficult for me to believe in only the social construction of mathematical facts without adherence to a platonic realm. In my opinion, what Kant calls the *sublime* in his aesthetics has a mathematical reality to me. My view is in no way original and is influenced by my just started engagement with the works of Hofstadter (1996, 1999), Penrose (2004) and Ramachandran (2004).

This default position on mathematical Platonism becomes important when I discuss the role of *metaphor* in a theory of pedagogical individualism in [section 2.5.3](#). A very thin line separates mathematical *realism* from mathematical *mysticism*. I recognize the danger of a slippery slope. However, at present, I am technically not qualified to offer arguments against the anticipated critiques on the lines of a slippery slope. But I am committed to defend the attacks against reduction of social phenomena like pedagogical individualism. A general outline of this argument would be that I am interested in *a* scientific study of pedagogical individualism that doesn't commit the naïve error of *uni-causal* reductionism of social phenomena to a natural science. Instead, I am arguing for a mathematical reduction with the qualification that this reduction should not be to discrete math (symbolic logic) but to analytical geometry. In my opinion, cognitive sciences have got the basics right, the problems are with metaphor of an abstract human information processor operating on symbols. All I can offer is a suggestion that a metaphorical shift might be scientifically productive as might result in technical innovations that can help enhance learning. I will have more to say on this in [section 2.5.3](#).

1.9 Spiritual Monism

In my mind, no laundry list of default philosophical positions is complete without an explicit statement on phenomena that matters for many people-religion and spirituality. In my opinion, the "either/or" position of the existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard between reason and faith, between the scientific and the spiritual, between the natural and the divine requiring a "leap of faith" is a false choice. I adhere to a position in Indian Philosophy termed spiritual monism technically similar to Leibniz's monism and Bertrand Russell's neural monism.

I started this litany of "default positions" by building upon John Searle's work and ended with a mention of Bertrand Russell's neutral monism. Let us move on to the next section on philosophical consideration of the notion intersubjectivity after an anecdotal quote by John Searle on Bertrand Russell. I warn the reader about the length of the quote but I have not exercised my editorial discretion to cut text. It seemed to me that the anecdote is worth lengthy citation.

> The fact that the world has become demystified to the point that religion no longer matters in the public way that it once did shows not so much that we are all becoming atheists but that we have moved beyond atheism to a point where the issues have a different meaning to us.
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> The impatient reader may well wonder when I am going to take a stand on the existence of God. Actually, I think the best remark on this question was made by Bertrand Russell at a dinner I attended as an undergraduate. Since this incident has passed into legend and a similar incident occurred when I was not present, I think I should tell the reader what actually happened as I remember it.
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> Periodically, every two years or so, the Voltaire Society, a society of intellectually inclined undergraduates at Oxford, held a banquet with Bertrand

Russell-the official patron of the society. On the occasion in question, we all went up to London and had dinner with Russell at a restaurant. He was then in his mideighties [sic], and had a reputation as a famous atheist. To many of us, the question seemed pressing as to what sort of prospects for immortality Russell entertained, and we put to him: *Suppose you have been wrong about the existence of God. Suppose that the whole story were true, and that you arrived at the Pearly Gates to be admitted by Saint Peter. Having denied God's existence all your life, what would you say to ... Him?* Russell answered without a moment's hesitation. **"Well, I would go up to Him, and I would say, 'You didn't give us enough evidence!'"**. [emphasis mine]

Readers, as always, can make their own interpretations of the above quote. I have arguments against the evidential grounds of Russell's devout atheism but those are absolutely irrelevant to the purposes of my proposal. So let's leave it at that.

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