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Abstract

This essay concerns a philosophical examination of the nature of mind and the relevant implications for mental health. Traditionally, realism and constructivism are regarded as two contrastive positions in explaining the nature of mind. While realists take discovery of reality as the main function of mind, constructivists regard it as creation of reality. Hence, epistemologically, realists emphasize on correspondence to reality as the criterion of validity or truth of the mind's contents, whereas constructivists regard the inner coherence of constructs as the main criterion. There have been exceptions for this polarity. Piaget is an important historical case for this exception. He talks of himself as a realist constructivist. He has taken a vital step in seeing realism and constructivism as reconcilable positions. However, it is argued that he has not been successful in providing a satisfied reconciliation. On one hand, embracing structuralism, he has undermined the individual subject, the inclination that has continued in different ways by different supporters of post-structuralism. On the other hand, emphasizing on negative feedback as the criterion for the changes of constructs, he has actually reduced correspondence to adaptation, whereas, adaptation is neither necessary nor sufficient for being correspondent to reality. A satisfied reconciliation should take both correspondence and coherence into account without reducing correspondence to adaptation or workability of constructs. So far as implications for mental health are concerned, a realistic constructivism indicates that mental health is dependent

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on: 1) inner coherence of constructs or resolving inner conflicts; 2) capability of constructs for adaptation to problematic situations; and 3) correspondence to reality as an ideal in the long run.

Introduction

Every procedure for providing mental health presupposes a philosophical view on the nature or characteristics of mind, as any philosophical view on mind could have implications for mental health. In the present essay, a realistic version of constructivism is regarded as the philosophical basis for suggesting criteria for mental health.

Traditionally, realism and constructivism are regarded as two contrastive positions in explaining the nature of mind. While realists usually take the discovery of reality as the main function of mind, constructivists regard it as the creation of reality. Hence, epistemologically, realists emphasize on the correspondence to reality as the criterion of validity or truth of the mind's contents, whereas constructivists regard the inner coherence of constructs as the main criterion.

However, realism and constructivism are reconcilable on the conditions that naïve realism is avoided and a more sophisticated version of realism is adopted (Bagheri 1995). And, in fact, there have been some exceptions for the polarity of realism vs. constructivism. Piaget is an important historical case for this exception as he talks about himself as a realist constructivist. He has taken a vital step in seeing realism and constructivism as reconcilable positions. However, it is argued here that he, as a structuralist, has not been quite successful in providing a satisfied reconciliation. Structuralism as well as post-structuralism is accused of undermining the subject. In the end, some implications of a realistic constructivism for mental health will be discussed.

Structuralism, Constructivism and the Subject

Among the constructivists, Piaget has tried to provide a realistic basis for constructivism by appealing to structuralism. Chomsky (1988) has also shown a similar appeal to structures of mind to give a realistic tone to his view. Piaget's interest in structure was inspired by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure in linguistics and a group of mathe-

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maticians called the 'Bourbaki'. The interesting point for Piaget in the structuralism of mathematics and modern logic was the role played by our operations on things; operations like integrating, ordering and classification. The point that operations are important was a background for him in providing constructivism.

When Piaget (1968, 1970) comes to deal with biological and psychological structures, he appeals to cybernetics and its logic of negative feedbacks to give an account of the relation between structures and reality. Thus, he regards biological equilibration by means of assimilation and accommodation as a process that occurs in a system having feedbacks.

One of the well-known accusations of structuralism has been the elimination of the subject. Accordingly, the subject as an inner agent in the mind is eliminated and the structure is replaced by it. It is worth noting that the elimination of the subject could also be seen in the works of thinkers who belong to the tradition of empiricism. Hume, for instance, strongly challenged the view that there is a subject in the individual independent of his thoughts and feelings. He claimed that one should not think that concepts like "self" or "person" in our everyday use refer to something. He argued that there is not a "self" within us because there is not a unified affection within us, but rather diverse affections and conceptions for which we merely assume a unified subject to exist (Hume 1951, pp. 251-2). According to his phenomenological analysis, Hume concludes that just because we cannot find a unified and stable affection or conception of a subject within us, it is not reasonable to assume a subject. Thus, he regards the mind as a theater in which different perceptions come, play, and go without there being an identity among them. Still, he warns that the notion of theater should not be misleading because we have no conception of a place for mind (a scene) in which the perceptions occur. The mind is constructed merely of diverse perceptions. Hence, Hume takes the questions about identity to be grammatical problems rather than philosophical ones (Ibid, p. 262). That is to say, our style in talking and using the words is what presupposes a unified subject and it is by no means a philosophically justified position to assume a subject.

Piaget, being in agreement with the essential point that there is not an individual subject, has tried to provide a response for the claim that structuralism leads to negation of the subject altogether. He accepts that structuralism has led to such a conclusion but attributes it only to what he calls the "static structuralism" (Piaget, 1968, p. 114). On the other hand, according to him, a dynamic structural-

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ism is reconcilable with a certain notion of subject. That is why he says: "'Structures' have killed neither the human nor the activities of the subject." (Ibid, p. 119)

In order to save the subject in dealing with structures, Piaget sees the following points important. Firstly, he regards structuralism as a method of study and analysis rather than a philosophy and admits that there have been misunderstandings about the subject based on certain philosophical presuppositions like the Cartesian dualism of the subject and the body.

Secondly, Piaget distinguishes between the individual and the epistemic subject. The latter means "the cognitive core common among all the [individual] subjects of the same level." (Ibid, p. 120) According to him, if the cognitive structure could be considered as the subject, it could only be regarded as the epistemic subject that is an abstract entity. The epistemic subject refers to cognitive structures that are common among all individuals: "It is then evident that if it is necessary to appeal to the activities of the subject for giving an account of the preceding constructions, it is a matter of an epistemic subject, that is to say the mechanisms common among all the individual subjects of the same level, which is, in other words, still a matter of the subject 'whatsoever'." (Ibid, p. 58)

In parallel to this point, Piaget distinguishes between the subject as "I" (moi) and as "the lived" (vécu). The former refers to the conscious subject that deals with the results and is always in danger of being fragmentary and hence at the exposure of misunderstanding. The latter, however, deals with the mechanisms that are mainly reflective abstractions or operations on the actions and provides coordination among them. Piaget emphasizes that these operations are what constitute the structures. Regarding the subject as "the lived", rather than "I", indicates that the subject needs to overcome her egocentrism by means of a continual decentering.

Piaget states that the subject exists because there is a continual structuration or construction through which structures could have a being (ibid, p. 120). In referring to this continual structuration, he uses the phrase of Lévi-Strauss that "ethnology is in the first place a psychology" to state that "psychology is in the first place a biology". He also considers the possibility of referring biology to physics and physics to mathematics, given that this happens in a circular way rather than a linear manner. (Ibid, p. 119)

On the whole, Piaget regards the subject as the epistemological or average subject whose developments could be explained by appealing to the cybernetics that is regarded to provide 'necessary and

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sufficient conditions' for the analysis of the actions of average subject by means of artificial intelligence model (Ibid, p. 59)

Post-structuralism and the Subject

Piaget has also given some comments on poststructuralists' account on the subject. In fact, Piaget merely refers to Michel Foucault (1966) and his archeological view on structures.

Piaget gives a classification of different accounts about the genesis of structure. In this classification, there are three types of accounts: pre-formation, contingent emergence, and construction. While Piaget himself takes the standpoint of construction, attributes the contingent emergence view to Foucault and criticizes it. (Piaget 1968, p. 52)

According to Piaget, so far as the idea of structure is concerned, Foucault's view, namely the contingent emergence, is self-contradictory (ibid). That is to say, accepting the contingent emergence of different "épistémè"s indicates that there is no structure for the development of reason during the human history. That is why Piaget calls Foucault's structuralism a "structuralism without structures". (Ibid, p. 114) And this is exactly what Piaget meant by the self-contradictory characteristic of Foucault's view because it is intended to be a structuralism, whereas it does not consider continuity in the development of the reason needed for a structure. Rather, according to Piaget, Foucault sees the development of the reason in terms of mutations.

Piaget believes that this has led Foucault to resound all the negative aspects of a static structuralism; namely the devaluation of history and genesis (by negating continuity), ignorance of functions, and negation of the subject. As for the positive aspect of structuralism, namely self-regulation and the resultant conservation during the development, he believes that Foucault holds only one thing constant, namely language, which is in fact enigmatic. Referring to the incoherence or contradiction of Foucault's view, Piaget concludes that structuralism needs to be combined with constructivism to become coherent (ibid, p. 115).

Piaget's criticism of Foucault does not mean that he regards no important role for Foucault in overcoming the problems of structuralism. He, in fact, admires Foucault; by saying that he might pave the ground for coming of another Kant who would awaken us from our dogmatic slumber (ibid, pp. 109-110). The most important role of Foucault in this regard is that he has shown that structure could not

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be understood successfully without appealing to construction (ibid, p. 115).

It is interesting to note that the accusation of structuralism as well as poststructuralism in eliminating the subject is revived now again. That is why a reaction has appeared among the more recent thinkers in France against poststructuralists. Ferry and Reneau (1990), among others, have claimed that a central theme in structuralism as well as post-structuralism has been the liquidation of the subject.

In an interview with Nancy, Derrida disputes his interpretation of the 'liquidation of the subject' in the postwar philosophy in France: "For these three discourses (Lacan, Althusser, Foucault) and for some of the thinkers they privilege (Freud, Marx, Nietzsche), the subject can be re-interpreted, re-stored, re-inscribed, it certainly isn't 'liquidated'. The question 'who', notably in Neitzsche, strongly reinforces this point. This is also true of Heidegger, the principle reference or target of the *doxa* we are talking about. The ontological questioning that deals with the subjectum, in its Cartesian and post-Cartesian forms, is anything but a liquidation." (Derrida, 1995, p. 257)

In this way, Derrida tries to defend poststructuralists against the accusation of 'liquidation of the subject' and claims that the subject is somehow involved in their works. He states that Lacan has only tried to decentralize the subject and Foucault has talked about the history of subjectivity and has returned to a kind of moral subject. Derrida (1990), in fact, does not agree with using general categories like poststructuralism on the ground that there are differences among the thinkers who are regarded as poststructuralists.

Dreyfus (1998) has also disputed the claim of liquidation of the subject in Foucault as well as Heidegger. He understands their dispute with the subject as merely against the Cartesian self-transparent subject and the Kantian autonomous agent. Dreyfus maintains that while for early Foucault the subject is reduced to a function of discourse, for middle and later Foucault there is more space for the subject so that in middle Foucault, writing can open up new worlds and in later Foucault, freedom is considered as the power to put what is taken for granted into question and to change oneself.

Derrida himself rejects the simplified and homogenous notion of the subject, on one hand, and affirms a kind of reference to the subject and responsibility on the other. Referring to his rejection of the simple notion of 'The Subject', he says: "But if certain premises are found 'in' Husserl, I'm sure that one could make a similar demonstra-

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tion in Descartes, Kant, and Hegel ... This would have at least the virtue of de-simplifying, of 'de-homogenizing' the reference to something like The Subject." (Derrida 1995, p. 264)

On the other hand, Derrida states that the notion of subject is inevitably involved in the discourses of philosophy as well as science: "I believe that at a certain level both of experience and of philosophical and scientific discourse, one cannot get along without the notion of the subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions." (Macksey & Donato, 1970, p. 271)

The notion of the subject that Derrida supports derives from the thoughts of Neitzsche, Heidegger and Levinas where they trace back the notion of subject in 'the other': "... then as concerns the 'Good' (Bien) of every morality, the question will come back to determining the best, most respectful, most graceful, and also the most giving way of relating to the other and of relating the other to the self." (Derrida, 1995, pp. 281-282)

Accordingly, Derrida regards the subject in a decentralized manner in which the relationship to others has an important place. This conception of the subject makes it possible for Derrida to talk about responsibility as well as the calculation of the subject: "The origin of the call that comes from nowhere, an origin in any case that is not yet a divine or human 'subject,' institutes a responsibility that is to be found at the root of all ulterior responsibilities (moral, juridical, political), and of every categorical imperative." (Ibid, p. 279)

Still Derrida believes that Heidegger's notion of Dasein does not completely get rid of a transcendental subject because characteristics in terms of being-present are regarded to be used for Dasein; characteristics like presence to the self, identity to the self, positionality, consciousness, intentionality, and humanity (ibid, p. 274). Derrida believes that these characteristics are based on polarities that need to be deconstructed.

For Derrida not only is it necessary to decentralize the subject by appealing to 'the other', but it is also important to decentralize humanity by appealing to the life in general: "... the limit between the living and the nonliving now seems to be as unsure ... as that between 'man' and 'animal'..." (Ibid, p. 281-282)

On the whole, Derrida evaluates the role of poststructuralism as elegant decentralizations of the subject rather than eliminating it altogether.

Realistic Constructivism and Mental Health

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Even though Piaget's appeal to the notion of structure is important to give a realistic basis for constructions, his overemphasis on the epistemological subject seems to undermine the individual subject. Realism and objectivity should not be appealed to at the price of losing the individual subject and, in fact, this is a risk that is taken by the structuralists.

With regard to the point that Piaget's epistemic subject consists of the whole general principles or logico-mathematical laws common among the individuals according to which the mind develops, and then it becomes clear that it cannot account for the individual subject and its characteristics like intention and freedom of will.

The overemphasis of Piaget on the cybernetics that is regarded to provide 'necessary and sufficient conditions' for the analysis of the actions of average subject by means of artificial intelligence model (Piaget 1968, p. 59) shows that the concepts of action and operation for him do not imply intention or purpose, namely the characteristics of the individual subject. In fact, the notion of feedback in cybernetic theory is based on a mechanical model that, methodologically speaking, takes the 'spectator' viewpoint for granted instead of the 'agent' point of view.

On the other hand, emphasizing on the negative feedback as the criterion for changing constructs, Piaget has actually reduced correspondence to adaptation, whereas, the latter is not sufficient for the former. A satisfied reconciliation should take both correspondence and coherence into account without reducing correspondence to adaptation or workability of constructs.

In the case of poststructuralists, and in particular Derrida's defense with regard to the accusation of eliminating the subject, even though his attempt to interpret it as decentralizing the subject is acceptable, it is doubtful that one can talk about the subject without taking into account some particular characteristics of the human compared to animals and nonliving beings. It is one thing to say that human beings are related to other living and nonliving beings and quite another to claim that there is no borderline between human beings and other entities so that particular characteristics, like intentionality, freedom and identity, could be saved for human beings.

Even though it is correct that the liquidation of subject could not be attributed to poststructuralists, it could nevertheless be claimed that a common feature among these thinkers is that they have overemphasized the structure at the expense of weakening the subject.

Still some of poststructuralists' attempts to decentralize the

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subject are welcomed. As it was explained before, in his criticism of Foucault, Piaget attempted to avoid the notion of contingency in his account of structures. However, it seems that, to some extent, Foucault is right in taking contingency into account. So far as the place of contingency in the development of the human mind is concerned the following points are important:

1. The entrance of contingency makes the process of development to some extent arbitrary. Even though Piaget sees this contradictory, it should be recognized that contingency is in contradiction only with a deterministic version of structuralism as well as a kind of structuralism that is not reconcilable with the acceptance of the subject. What I mean here is the individual subject, rather than what Piaget calls the epistemic subject. The latter, being equivalent to the general laws of the development, might itself lead to the negation of contingency. However, the individual subject along with the capacities like free will is a good candidate for providing contingency into the development of the mind.

2. On the other hand, the acceptance of contingency throughout the development of mind does not seem acceptable either. This is because it makes it difficult to justify similarities of the human mind throughout the world. These similarities need to be explained by means of some necessary, rather than contingent, elements or structures in the human mind.

3. In fact, both the elements of necessity and contingency are involved in the development of mind. Thus, so far as similarities of human minds are concerned, the element of necessity is explanatory, as the element of contingency is needed for explaining differences. To put in Piaget's terms, the epistemological subject could be suitable only for explaining the similarities, whereas the differences need to be understood by means of the individual subject. Chomsky (1988; Peter 1999) has tried to accept both necessary and contingent dimensions. However, he attributes the contingent aspect of mind to situations and conditions within which the mind develops. But, in addition to that, this contingency could be attributed, in part, to the mind itself, given that the individual subject has characteristics like free will and choice.

4. The acceptance of contingency in the development of mind due to the characteristics of individual subject, among other fac-

tors, provides a new background for construction and, in particular, personal construction. That is to say, personal differences could be understood by means of personal preferences.

So far, it can be concluded that constructivism can have a realistic feature by appealing to structures. However, this trend should not eliminate the realm of contingency and in particular the kind of contingency that is due to the individual subject and personal constructions.

Now, when personal constructions are viewed from the mental health angle, realism has more things to say. This is because the mere fact that individuals can have contributions in their development does not imply that whatever people do is in the direction of their mental health. The notion of 'realistic' in realistic constructivism indicates that individual constructions could have distributions in mental health as far as they could be described as 'true' constructions. Describing a construct as 'true', according to realism, indicates that the construct corresponds to the reality of mind. From among the whole personal constructs, only those that correspond to the reality of mind could provide mental health.

The realistic position implies that mere 'adjustment' to situations could not be accepted as the criterion for judging about the role of constructs in mental health. Adjustment, along with its logic of negative feedback, might be one of the signs for claiming correspondence to reality; however, contrary to what Piaget has said, it does not provide "necessary and sufficient" conditions for explaining the constructs or, in the case of present discussion, their correspondence to reality. The ability of adjustment in 'false' constructs could be due to their being at the threshold of the tolerance of reality. For instance, appealing to the theory of flat earth, one might be able to adjust successfully to some situations, as is the case in making a stable building on the earth. This, however, merely indicates that construction of the building based on the false theory is at the threshold of the nature's tolerance, rather than being a true theory-based construction that correspond to reality.

So far as implications for mental health are concerned, a realistic constructivism claims that mental health is dependent on three conditions:

1-   Firstly, the inner coherence of constructs is important. In order to provide this, one needs to resolve inner conflicts of constructs. However, it is not meant by inner conflict any kind of conflict whatsoever because some types of conflicts are rather necessary for mental health

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in providing inner dynamism. It could be said that only those conflicts that rest at the highest level of mental constructs hierarchy should be resolved by providing coherence.

2-   Secondly, the capability of constructs in order for providing adaptation to problematic situations is concerned. Inner coherence might be necessary for adaptation but it is by no means sufficient. There could be coherent constructs, like an illusory system of constructs, which fall short of being adequate for obtaining adaptation to difficult situations.

3-   Thirdly, correspondence to reality should be taken into account. In this case, it could be said again that both coherence and adaptation might, at best, be necessary for constructs to be true, namely to correspond to reality, but they are not sufficient. As the coherence could be illusory, adaptation could be obtained by wrong constructs that are at the threshold of nature's tolerance. Undoubtedly, given that coherence is provided, there is no way other than adaptability to situations *in the long run* to check the correspondence of constructs to reality. But the important point is that adaptation is not the same as correspondence, rather it is just a sign for obtaining correspondence. This indicates that we could approach the truth steadily by providing more and more adaptability, as well as coherence, in our theories. This point is referred to as 'verisimilitude' (Popper 1963). That is why we should distinguish between naïve and sophisticated adaptation. The latter appears only in the long run, whereas the former is dependent merely on here and now. If adaptation were the same as correspondence, then it would be there as soon as the naïve adaptation appears. Even in the case of long run adaptation, there is an elegant point: while it does increase the possibility of correspondence, it does not guarantee it. Thus, it might turn out that some of the long run adaptations have been wrong and collapse. In these cases, one should again reconstruct his or her constructions to provide a new and more complicated adaptability for making sure of correspondence.

To conclude, according to realistic constructivism, mental health is dependent on three main criteria: inner coherence among the

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foundational constructs, adaptability of the constructs to outer conditions, and correspondence of constructs to reality that should be sought always as an ideal.

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