ABSTRACT. Constructivism is the idea that we construct our own world rather than it being determined by an outside reality. Its most consistent form, Radical Constructivism (RC), claims that we cannot transcend our experiences. Thus it doesn’t make sense to say that our constructions gradually approach the structure of an external reality. The mind is necessarily an epistemological solipsist, in contrast to being an ontological solipsist who maintains that this is all there is, namely a single mind within which the only world exists. RC recognizes the impossibility of the claim that the world does not exist. Yet, RC has the potential to go much further. I claim that RC provides the foundation of a new world-view in which we can overcome hard scientific problems. Thus, the paper is urging us to carry RC further, not just on philosophical grounds, but also into the domain of science.

KEY WORDS: epistemology, instrumentalism, scientific realism, solipsism, truth

1. INTRODUCTION

Radical Constructivism (RC) is the insight that we cannot transcend the horizon of our experiences. Experiences are all we can work with; out of experiences we construct our world. Thus, there are no mind-independent entities on which our cognition is based. This does not imply that Radical Constructivists deny the existence of such an objective world populated by mind-independent entities, the reality. Neither do they assert its existence. RC is agnostic. Clinging to an external reality would make us acolytes in a cult of claiming something which we can never know, and which – this is the constructive aspect of RC – we also don’t even need in order to explain cognition and what we commonly refer to as ‘the world’. The present issue sheds more light on the consequences of this, what is for many people still an unusual and – understandably – hard to accept insight. In the ‘traditional Cartesian world-view’,
we see ourselves as entities among other entities in a reality that is independent of us. We are separated from that reality by the classical subject–object dichotomy. Here the I, on the other side the Everything-else, to which the I makes reference. White snow is white because it is white, as Tarski’s (1944) Semantic Theory of Truth claims. What the new world-view, RC, says is the following. Although we can at anytime assume perception and experience in general to be the result of the impact of the reality on the I, we cannot prove this in any way. We are ‘epistemological solipsists’ rather than God-like creatures equipped with the omnipotence to recognize reality – cf. Putnam’s (1990) “God’s Eye point of view”: “Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere” (p. 28). Nor are we ontological solipsists who want to negate something (or claim its non-existence) which cannot be proven anyway.1

So simple this insight may seem, yet so difficult it is to find acceptance. It is therefore not surprising that much of the ongoing discussion in and at the periphery of RC is still concerned with the basics of RC – defending itself against attacks from the realists’ camp who accuse RC of being solipsist – instead of being devoted to developing RC further. Book titles like “How real is real?” (Watzlawick, 1976) seem to suggest that RC would be concerned with questions of ontology, i.e., with the existence (or non-existence) of reality. But it is exactly this epistemological question which is strictly speaking not part of the RC discourse. It is faintly reminiscent of ‘Kant’s Scandal’ according to which it is a scandal that philosophy hasn’t been able to falsify idealists’ claims, and Heidegger’s response that the true scandal is that philosophy has never given up attempting to find such a falsification. As Searle (1999) rightly comments, “the biggest single obstacle to progress of a systematic theoretical kind has been the obsession with epistemology”. Asking What is knowledge?, is meaningless and does not lead anywhere. What plays an important role is the question: How do we gain knowledge? As a consequence, RC is interested in investigating the mechanisms of knowledge construction. Therefore, RC has the constructive opportunity to transform from a purely philosophical-argumentative framework into a scaffolding for science.