The Human Search for Meaning: Scientific and Theological Investigations

Richard H. Morgan, School of Social Welfare, Stony Brook University

Abstract

Scientific investigations of empirical reality and theological investigations into the non-empirical realm of God's existence and relationship to humanity are often thought to be mutually exclusive, if not antagonistic, enterprises. What is often overlooked in the Science vs. Religion debates, however, is that certain 20th century strands of development in each area suggest a possible common ground in the mutual insight regarding the importance of 'Meaning' to any exploration of human reality. In this paper I examine some of the developments within certain approaches to science and theology that parallel each other in their common concern about subjective meaning and in the influence these concerns have had on methodology in the respective fields of investigation. The basis of the common ground is the influence that Phenomenology has had on philosophy and epistemology in the 20th century and the impact of this on a wide range of academic disciplines. From the scientific/empirical side, I focus primarily on Social Constructionism as one of several schools of thought which have led investigators to shift towards the use of more qualitative research methodologies. These are methods designed to probe the meaning systems within which human beings, individually and collectively, experience, integrate and create the social realities in which they live. On the side of theological investigations, I examine a similar shift in emphasis evident in the work of the 20th century German theologian Karl Rahner who sought to engage the insights and challenges posed by post-modern philosophy by focusing on the subjective experience of human beings as a starting point for the human search for God. By way of conclusion, possibilities for mutual dialogue and possibly collaboration between these two realms of investigation are also suggested.

Introduction

The great debate between or over Science and Religion that has been raging for the past five hundred years or so has recently been renewed through the attempts of various representatives of science, atheists and theists, who having ventured out of their core areas of specialization to discuss the origin, nature and future of religion, have found themselves very popular in the wider market that exists for popular religion. The argument has also been joined by philosophers, theologians, pastors and writers of various sorts on both sides claiming either that science effectively puts an end to the need for religion and that anyone who continues to adhere to such nonsense is delusional or that scientists who take such a view are suffering from a kind of tunnel vision produced by their own narrow specialization and are very naïve in their attempts to represent either the great questions about existence that have always been a part of human reality or the answers which both philosophy and theology have tried to provide to these questions.

Much of this debate has centered on a view of science that harkens back to a the commonly held vision of science as the human search for a way of producing knowledge of which anyone

could be more certain: using methods of investigation that are objective and replicable, measures that are carefully constructed for reliability and validity so as to accurately capture the reality of the outside, objective world, as well as methods of analyzing data and reporting results that would provide factual information that could be counted on because it had been tested and re-tested. Such a process for producing knowledge was intended to be so objective and verifiable that the human community would no longer be bound to the dictates of tradition or authority (in either religious or political forms) for what constituted the knowable and the known. This Enlightenment or Modernist view of science rested upon the positivist and, to some extent, materialist foundation that what counted as knowledge is only that which could be positively verified through the use of the five senses (empirical investigation). Such a point of view assumes that there is an objective world out there to be measured and that what counts most in science is the objectivity of the measuring process by which the nature of the world could be discovered. From this point of view, who the scientist was or who the consumers of science were did not really matter very much. The point was to produce knowledge that would stand up to any kind of scrutiny because of the objective nature of the learning process: if anyone remained skeptical about the results they simply had to go do the investigation for themselves to confirm the findings.

This view of science is typically the one presented in any of the science versus religion debates. Religion is, of course, up against it in this framework because much of what it would take for granted as part of its thought-world would not be allowed into the debate under the positivist/materialist rules of science. Any concept referring to "non-material" reality, either God, the Soul, Angels, or Demons, for example, simply do not measure up to the requirement of the empirical approach. On the pro-religion side of course, matters such as love, hope, compassion, and experiences of beauty, goodness, truth and even something as mundane as color represent other kinds of intangibles that seem to distinguish human existence but would, however, also fail to make the grade and tend to be explained or explained away by science through some form of reductionism that sees all human experience as nothing more than the interplay of sub-atomic particles or the ongoing expression of pre-programmed genes.

My interest in all of this stems from my experience in what might be termed "both camps." On the one hand, I have spent much of my time over the last twenty years involved in various research projects and in teaching research methods to students in our school at various levels including doctoral education. On the other hand, I have an earlier history of having spent a great deal of time studying theology in preparation for ministry and, in fact, served actively in the ministry for several years before changing careers. I resigned my ministry as a Catholic priest because of my decision and desire to get married not due to any sort of disillusionment with ministry or theology. In fact, theology has continued to remain a special area of interest for me and I have tried to continue reading as much as I can in various areas of the subject.

From these experiences, I have come to notice that much of the science/religion debate seems to involve what would be called "straw-man" arguments in philosophical language: easy to set

up and easy to knock down. And this occurs on both sides. The 'Science' side tends to make simplistic generalizations about the nature of religious or theological claims and then tears them down by referring to the non-empirical quality of the claims and usually with the suggestion that some form of delusion is involved for the sake of comfort in the face of a cruel world. These arguments are often made in a spirit of great disdain and quite vociferously, leading some to wonder about the level of emotion involved and whether some of these proponents of the science side are really as value-neutral as they would like to suggest of themselves.

More to the point for the sake of the aim of this paper, on the religion side the straw man argument of appears in the form of a somewhat narrow view of what constitutes science and how scientific research is carried out. In particular, what seems very often to be missing is an appreciation for how science and the philosophy that drives the way science is conducted have not remained as monolithic and positivist as the arguments might suggest. Of course, it must be said that this is probably due to the fact that many of those on the science side have tended to come more from the physical sciences, biology in particular, wherein the materialist/positivist approach still carries the day for the most part (the term 'neo-positivist' would probably be a more consistent description today, reflecting the greater awareness that now exists of the important place researcher bias can play in experiments and the insights stemming from conclusions in quantum physics that the observer always has an impact on what is observed).

Another way of saying what is missing in the debate is that the influence of the social sciences is often not represented. Teaching research methods in the social sciences is something of a mixed bag. On the one hand, some social scientists are very committed to a positivist or neo-positivist vision, their approach to theory tends to be deductive in the sense of testing ideas by seeing how they stand up to empirical evidence, and their methods tend to be quantitative: reducing all observations to some level of numerical expression that allows for mathematical analysis. Other social scientists, however, approach the study of human reality, the subject matter of the social sciences, from a standpoint that tends to see the positivist outlook as too naïve when dealing with human beings. For these scientists, whether there is an objective world out there to be measured is of very little relevance for understanding the human world. To understand human beings in terms of why they behave the way they do individually or in groups, in other words, to understand them on levels beyond the mere physical description of how body parts function, this group of researchers would argue that science must study how people understand themselves and how they interpret what is going on around them. This has a great impact on research methodology. Theory tends to be approached more inductively: observations are made without a prior theoretical framework with the hope that the observations will lead to new understanding and new theory. Methodology does not focus on reducing all observations to quantifiable indicators but seeks a detailed understanding of the depth and uniqueness of human lives and, because human behavior is a function of how people interpret their reality, how people create meaning in their lives.

What becomes apparent in studying both research methodology and theology from the mid-twentieth century to the present is that both fields have been influenced by very similar philosophical undercurrents. In fact, certain approaches to science and theology can be seen as running parallel courses as they have sought to examine human reality not from a distant, objective, outsiders perspective but from the point of view of the human subject. These movements in science and theology can both be said to be concerned with Meaning: what is the subjective experience of human beings, how do they interpret or make meaning out of that subjective experience and how does that meaning motivate them in their lives.

My intention in writing this paper, then, is to sketch out these parallels between some forms of science and some forms of theology as these have developed over the last century. Starting with scientific inquiry, I will examine the movement that has come to be known by various names but most often as Social Constructionism (SC). This review will consist of looking at the emergence of SC as a challenge to the normative, positivist view of reality; the key elements of a SC approach to understanding the way in which human beings come to construct their own social worlds; and, finally, the way in which these insights have impacted upon the conduct of social science. Moving on then to theological inquiry, I will attempt to show how the same philosophical insights that led to the development of SC also had an impact on the way in which certain theologians saw the task of theology and subsequently developed an approach which, as with SC, focused on the subjective experience of human beings as the starting point of that task. To illustrate this kind of development in theology, I will briefly review the work of Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, whose approach to theology may be seen as parallel to the approach of the social constructionists towards sociology or social psychology. From this, I will conclude the paper with some reflections on how the insights gained from seeing the connection between these approaches to science and religion, or research and theology, may serve to strengthen each other and possibly to reduce the acrimony between at least some of the proponents of the two fields.

I.   Scientific Investigations

In this first section I will provide a brief overview of Social Constructionism as a philosophical movement that has had major implications for the conduct of scientific research. It is difficult to actually categorize the origin of SC in terms of academic disciplines. The watershed text that is typically held up as the work that gave SC it's start and name is *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, first published in 1966. Berger and Luckman were writing as sociologists and described their book as "intended as a systematic, theoretical treatise in the sociology of knowledge."[1] More recent authors, however, tend to identify SC with

---

[1] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), v.

psychology or social psychology.[2] SC has also been classed broadly as one of various forms of "interpretive social science (ISS): hermeneutics, constructionism, ethnomethodology, cognitive, idealist, phenomenological, subjectivist, and qualitative sociology."[3] There is no arguing with the fact, however, that SC in these forms did not drop out of the sky beginning in 1966 with Berger and Luckman, but emerged from the ongoing development in the field of philosophy of concerns centered on the subjective experience of human beings and the linguistic nature of human reality.

In their very comprehensive overview of the philosophical foundations of SC, Lock and Strong trace the start of this line of thought back to a little known Italian scientist and philosopher named Giovanni Batista Vico who lived through the end of the 17th and into the early 18th century. Vico was the first to challenge the prevailing Cartesian consensus that the world existed as something external to the human mind and that the truth of it could be known through empirical observation. For Vico, "the notion of timeless truths stated in universal mathematical symbols—that anyone, anywhere, anytime, could grasp because of the universality of human nature—was illusory."[4] He goes on to indicate the importance of understanding the historical origins of any form of knowledge and is the first to make the distinction between the type of knowledge that humans have of their own experience, motivation, intentions, etc., and the kind of knowledge one may claim to have of external objects such as rocks or trees. The former way of knowing is much more certain because the human "has an insider's' knowledge of his or her actions, a knowledge that is very different from that one can have of objects and processes in the world one did not make. This is not a knowledge of disembodied facts, but an understanding 'from within'…"[5] While there are many other points on which Vico foreshadows the work of later philosophers that in turn led to the development of SC, one final point to be made here is his emphasis on the fact that humans create their own histories and traditions:

> Vico accepts that he and his fellows are creatures born to a tradition of rational thought. This, he conjectures, however, is not a universal truth of all humans true for all times, and our rational tradition must itself have been constructed out of some other precursor. Consequently, we have a great difficulty in stepping outside of our own tradition to grasp what another mode of life might be like.6

Vico's idea that humans in fact create or 'construct' their own social worlds and that these social worlds are what humans have the best knowledge of is where he was most at odds with the

---

[2] See Vivien Burr, *Social Constructionism* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Kenneth J. Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction (*Washington: Sage, 2009).

[3] Larry W. Kreuger and Lawrence W. Neuman, *Social Work Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Applications* (New York: Pearson, 2006), 77.

[4] Andy Lock and Tom Strong, *Social Constructionism: Sources and Stirrings in Theory and Practice.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 14.

[5] Lock and Strong, *Social Constructionism*, 15.

[6] Lock and Strong, *Social Constructionism*, 15.

scientific community of his day and these same ideas are what set SC and other interpretavist schools of thought off from the dominant discourse of positivist influenced science today.

Having started with Vico, Lock and Strong go on to discuss the history of philosophical thought in the 20th century that has led the development of Social Constructionism. They start by examining the early phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz and Maurice Merleau-Ponty which was concerned with focusing on the phenomena of subjective consciousness prior to the later process of objectification which comes with reflection. These writers, contrary to Descartes' legacy of separating mind and world into distinct camps in which the former looks out upon the latter, tended to see mind and world in a kind of relationship that occurred in the act of consciousness which always exists prior to our ways of describing our experience. So for instance with Husserl:

> There is no Cartesian problem of having to construct any convoluted proofs for the reality of physical objects. Husserl is asking about something quite different: what is the meaning of these phenomena which are constituted in the relation between consciousness and the things it is necessarily conscious of as a condition of its own existence. There is no subject-object dichotomy at the root of consciousness; rather there is a relation in which meaning arises. Phenomenology is the systematic investigation of these contents of consciousness.[7]

Perhaps more concretely, what these theorists had in common is that they "were concerned with making sense of peoples' actions from an 'insider's perspective'. The view was that individuals have particular perspectives upon the world that make sense of their experiences very much as 'their experiences'."[8] The importance of meaning is evident here as is the social process by which humans create their understanding of the world: "intersubjective experience is fundamental to constructing: ourselves as objective subjects; others as experiencing subjects; and the entire objective spatio-temporal world that we conduct our unreflective social interactions within."[9] So it is that we make sense of our experience within the framework provided by the cultural context in which we find ourselves. Language is critical to this effort as a tool by which we begin to establish the meaning of our experiences. This leads to the next major step among the forerunners of SC in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and the concern for Hermeneutics.

While the scope of this paper allows for only a brief review of some of the influences on the later development of SC, it is especially important for the purposes of this paper to highlight the contributions of Martin Heidegger because it is with Heidegger and Hermeneutics that a bridge is established between the kind of scientific investigations that follow upon SC and the kind of theological investigations conducted by Karl Rahner to be considered later. This is due to the fact that Rahner was himself a student of Heidegger and was strongly influenced by the

---

[7] Lock and Strong, *Social Constructionism*, 33.
[8] Lock and Strong, *Social Constructionism*, 35.
[9] Lock and Strong, *Social Constructionism*, 34.

latter's phenomenological/hermeneutical approach in the way in which he, Rahner, developed his approach to theology.

As a student of Husserl, Heidegger's work was very much in line with the earlier phenomenology in that he was concerned with the reality of experience prior to the point at which reflection tends to objectify that experience (what is often called the 'pre-reflective' level of awareness). He was also concerned to take into account the insights of earlier hermeneutical scholarship. Hermeneutics refers to the study of meaning and, as a field of scholarship, it originated with certain 19th century scholars such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey in their attempts to recover the what the original meaning of ancient texts were to the author and to the audience for whom they were first written. For these scholars, "meaning is contextualized and historicized, so trying to understand writings or sayings from one era or context, using those of a different context or era, creates problems."[10] In other words, meaning is not a universal 'given' that crosses cultures but is embedded in the cultural contexts that frame the author's experience of life.

Heidegger wanted to move beyond just looking at how people come to understand their experience, what they know and how they know it, to examine their ways of being in the world, "with looking beyond this to our ways of living life without thought and reflection."[11] Key to Heidegger's thought is this concept of Being which for him refers to the very mundane pre-reflective daily existence in which people get along and do many things without thinking critically about what they are doing. "We are not born into a world that we theorize before we act within it, we join others already engaged in life. It is only when these engagements become problematic that we need to think about and come up with a language to account for them…context is fundamental to how people understand and act differently."[12] We are engaged in life in a unique and particular context and use language we have inherited within that context to make sense of all that is happening to us. When the stock of language we are used to does not measure up to the novelty of an experience, then we must search for new language in order to come to a new place of understanding. By doing this we extend our "horizon of understanding"[13] and, therefore, open up new ways of being. For Heidegger, this "is how history…is made in selective ways for individuals and cultures-it informs what people use and do in their engagements with life and what results from those engagements."[14] Language, therefore, becomes a central focus for Heidegger and later philosophers such as Wittgenstein because it reveals the lived relational experience of being in the world. Since human beings create and extend language as Heidegger suggests, then the experience of being is as known in

---

[10] Lock and Strong, *Social Constructionism*, 55.
[11] Lock and Strong, *Social Constructionism*, 57.
[12] Lock and Strong, *Social Constructionism*, 58.
[13] Lock and Strong, *Social Constructionism*, 63.
[14] Lock and Strong, *Social Constructionism*, 60.

language is constructed within the social contexts of human life. This will be the starting point for the development of Social Constructionism.

      While the above review of the philosophical foundations of SC has been necessarily truncated by the scope of this paper, it should be enough to indicate the general nature of the thought leading up to SC. What remains now is to examine the basic ideas involved in the SC point of view and then to indicate the kind of impact this approach has had on the conduct of scientific investigations. Most writers on the topic of SC look back to the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman entitled *The Social Construction of Reality* as the seminal presentation of Social Constructionism.[15] Berger and Luckman were sociologists who set themselves the task of redefining that specialization in sociology called the Sociology of Knowledge. Up to that point, the sociology of knowledge as a field of study had been primarily concerned with the historical development and societal influences on thought. For Berger and Luckman, much of the problem in the field had to do with the fact that what was taken as "knowledge" in a society was often that which had been distilled upon reflection into theories, a kind of formal presentation of ideas. The difficulty with this was that theorizing represented a kind of second level of knowledge that, while important for particular purposes, did not account for all the knowledge that exists in a society at previous levels of human experience, i.e., prior to the formal conceptual process of theorizing. As they explain:

> The theoretical formulations of reality, whether they be scientific or philosophical or even mythological, do not exhaust what is "real" for the members of a society. Since this is so, the sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people "know" as "reality" in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. In other words, commonsense "knowledge" rather than "ideas" must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge. It is precisely this "knowledge" that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist.[16]

The sociology of knowledge must back-up its focus to this previous "commonsense" level of knowing and ask about the way in which knowledge understood this way is actually transmitted throughout a society and to all the members of a society.

      The social nature of knowledge is taken almost as given by these authors: "Sociological interest in questions of "reality" and "knowledge" is thus initially justified by the fact of their social relativity. What is "real" to a Tibetan monk may not be "real" to an American businessman…it follows that specific agglomerations of "reality" and "knowledge" pertain to specific social contexts…"[17] Because of the social nature of knowledge, the "need for a "sociology of knowledge" is thus already given with the observable differences between

---

[15] Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*; see also Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 12 and Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 23.
[16] Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 14.
[17] Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 2-3.

societies in terms of what is taken for granted as "knowledge" in them."[18] While this appears to be something of an assumptive leap here, Berger and Luckman go on throughout the remainder of *The Social Construction of Reality* to propose their understanding of how human individuals experience life in such a way that meaning becomes constructed by the social reality of what they call "everyday life" and the way each individual is incorporated into the social reality of the time and place in which they are born, thus accounting for the existence of such "social relativity."

At the root of this analysis, they are very clear about the philosophical approach they take as their guide: "The method we consider best suited to clarify the foundations of knowledge in everyday life is that of phenomenological analysis, a purely descriptive method and, as such, "empirical" but not "scientific"—as we understand the nature of empirical sciences."[19] Later social scientists would no doubt disagree with this assessment of the "scientific" value of this approach. While all science must necessarily be empirical, not all science is necessarily explanatory in the traditional/positivist sense of the term that would look to classical experimentation as the gold-standard of all scientific efforts to produce knowledge. Much of the point of the discussion of scientific method that has been influenced by social constructionist thought has been that such "descriptive" or even "exploratory" approaches to research suggested by a more phenomenological approach would, in fact, provide a better understanding of the nature of human reality in a particular social setting precisely because of the avenue it provides into the subjective process of attributing meaning to reality that is the hallmark of human existence. What is important at this point, however, is simply to note the close link to the kind of phenomenological approach discussed previously. This same link will be pointed out later in the examination of Karl Rahner's approach to theological investigations.

From this beginning in sociology, SC tended to be picked up by the field of social psychology. Key to this transition was the work of Kenneth and Mary Gergen in their application of SC to psychology. In her review of the emergence of SC, Burr states:

> In psychology, the emergence of social constructionism is usually dated from Gergen's (1973) paper 'Social psychology as history' in which he argues that all knowledge, including psychological knowledge, is historically and culturally specific, and that we therefore must extend our enquiries beyond the individual into social, political and economic realms for a proper understanding of the evolution of present-day psychology and social life.[20]

Burr in fact would use Gergen's presentation of the elements that make up the social constructionist approach in her overview of SC.[21] With this in mind, in attempting to

---

[18] Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 3.
[19] Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 20.
[20] Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 13.
[21] See Burr's citation of Gergen's 1985 article in Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 2.

provide an overview of SC today, I will follow Gergen's most recent outline of its key features as presented in his *An Invitation to Social Construction, 2ⁿᵈ Edition*.[22]

Gergen identifies five key features or "assumptions"[23] of SC as it is typically understood by those for whom it has become a kind of Weltanschauung that underlies their scientific analysis of the social world. These will be reproduced here with a brief explanation of each:

1. The way in which we understand the world is not required by "what there is". Typically in the natural sciences operating under the assumptions of positivism or neo-positivism, the "world" is understood to be something that exists out there in its own reality, over and against the consciousness of the person who comes into contact with the world. Because of this the typical scientific/positivist approach to the idea of studying the world is that, since it is out there as it is on its own, anyone can go out an measure it and come to an agreement about the nature of the world based on those objective measurements. Another way of stating this would be that our understanding of the world is "required" (to use Gergen's term) by the reality of the world, i.e., that there should be no debate about the nature of reality once we have come up with a good way of measuring it. Reality is what it is and we just have to get to know it as the objective something that is out there.

This is where the first key assumption of SC comes in to indicate how different this new way of thinking is from the positivist approach. By stating that the way in which we come to understand reality is not "required by "what is there", Gergen is turning the focus away from whatever the nature of the reality might actually be and towards the predicate in the statement. Human "understanding" is what is at issue here and the way in which humans understand any reality is based on the subjective reality of the person who is doing the understanding or, in other words, attempting to make meaning out of a particular situation. People receiving the same sensory stimuli will interpret that input differently depending upon their readiness to take in the input. This, in turn, is dependent upon the social reality that has formed the context of the person's ability to make meaning at all. That social reality includes primarily the language within which the person is embedded and which enables that person to associate experience with concepts and symbols in order to represent the experience (understand it) to themselves and others. Some of these issues will be emphasized in Gergen's other assumptions. As Burr states it: "Social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be. This means that the categories with which we human beings apprehend the world do not necessarily refer to real divisions."[24]

---

[22] Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction.*

[23] See Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 5-13. In what follows, the titles of the five assumptions will be taken directly from Gergen as cited here without further citation for the titles as they occur.

[24] Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 3.

While this might seem to contradict something of a common-sense way of seeing things, it should be remembered how differently our education and language prepares us for seeing events differently. What might be considered poverty in one part of the world might be considered fairly well off in another. What poverty means to a social worker is going to be very different from what it means to a banker and both will probably be very different from what it means to someone who is actually living in poverty as the context of their "everyday life" to use Berger and Luckman's term. Even within the natural sciences, the insights into the nature of matter that have come from quantum mechanics have only served to underscore Burr's point about the suspicion we should have about the concepts we use to frame our understanding of reality.

2. The ways in which we describe and explain the world are the outcomes of relationships. With this assumption Gergen is pointing to the essentially social nature of the meaning making process for human beings. As an example he proposes the idea of how an infant learns over time to distinguish adults into different categories that adults themselves might use (e.g., based on different relationships, professions, genders, etc.). As he states:

> All these terms have their origins in human communities. What we take to be true about the world is not then born of the pictures in our minds, but of relationships. Understandings of the world are achieved through coordinations among persons—negotiations, agreements, comparing views, and so on. From this standpoint, relationships stand prior to all that is intelligible. Nothing exists for us as an intelligible world of objects and persons until there are relationships.[25]

This idea of relationships "standing prior" to all intelligible (i.e., understandable) perception harkens back to the phenomenological roots of SC which sought to examine the original experience of perception which is already immersed in a social/linguistic context that exists unthematically prior to perception of a particular object. These relationships and the way they have formed us to see the world is what we bring to perception prior to any particular awareness.

3.   Constructions gain their significance from their social utility. The way in which we understand reality based on the relationships and language by which we approach all experience is best understood as a construction of reality within the allowable patterns of understanding given by our social milieu. As in the first assumption, the point here is not that there is no "real" reality "out there" but that human perception cannot know any reality apart from the socially derived preparedness with which anyone approaches perception. Within these meaning worlds that emerge from such a social context, this third assumption indicates that certain ways of

---

[25] Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 6.

describing reality will become more important than other ways of describing it because they are found to be more social useful. In this way, for a particular social group, a way of thinking and talking about something becomes more "truthful" because, within their way of understanding the world, that way serves everyday experience better than other ways. While this assumption often leaves SC open to the charge of relativism with regard to truth, given the foundation that they have first laid for the social nature of perception it would be difficult to understand truth as other than a kind of socially worked out compromise as to how we understand and communicate about objects and events. Such a point of view does not rule out in an a priori sense that, given enough time for the necessary amount of cross-cultural negotiation and communication, more and more agreement would not be achieved between different meaning worlds over what language tends to best describe experiences of different sorts. The point is, however, that if such agreement ever would happen (or when it does happen within a given meaning world) it would be due to the fact that particular ways of understanding work better than others for the members of a society and, eventually, everyone begins to adopt that way of understanding through negotiated agreements of discourse. This would seem to be true even in the "hard" or natural sciences in which ways of understanding which in themselves tended to be useful and in line with common sense (flat-earth; geo-centric universe; clock-work Newtonian mechanics) eventually gave way to even more "useful" ways of understanding (earth as a sphere; heliocentric solar system; relativity and/or quantum mechanics; etc.).

4. As we describe and explain, so do we fashion our future. In this assumption, Gergen is indicating the fact that the social world we live in, our experience of reality from within the socially derived view-finder we are looking through, is an open reality that not only has been constructed by social agreement in the past, but may be reconstructed by new agreements on how to understand reality. This assumption points both backwards and forwards and, in some sense, addresses concerns of both the more conservative elements within a social nexus as well as the more progressive elements. Traditions are bound up by the language and symbols by which they are expressed and maintained. To "conserve" such traditions, the language of tradition must, on the one hand, be maintained and perpetuated while, on the other hand, must continually be renewed as new socially agreed upon ways of understanding and expressing experience come about: "if institutions such as government, law, religion, education, and so on, are to survive, they must continuously modify and rework the meaning of their languages."[26] Social and historical contexts change and meaning changes with them. Traditions that do not stay in touch with these changes may find themselves no longer relevant due to the fact that no one any longer understands the language that is being used from an older time because no one is prepared to understand reality that way any longer. This, it seems, is a particularly difficult task for religions who tend to hang in this delicate balance between wanting to maintain a tradition of truth as it

---

[26] Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 11.

has been understood in the past and yet having to reformulate that truth in a way that is framed in terms of how people in a given social context understand reality. As we shall see as we move on to look at theological investigations, it was this kind of challenge that led Karl Rahner to rework more traditional presentations of religion, God and Christianity towards a new framework of understanding more consistent with the kinds of philosophical discussions being held in the twentieth century. Yet, as Gergen points out, this kind of challenge also presents wonderful opportunities to move beyond those elements of traditional language and understanding which may have been oppressive or discriminatory in either intention or effect:

> Transforming ourselves, our relationships, or our culture need not await the intervention of some expert, a set of laws, force of arms, bold leaders, public policies or the like. As we speak together *right now*, we participate in creating the future—for good or ill. If we long for change, we should shake up our traditional ways of constructing the world and set out to generate new ways of making sense.[27]

The fact that just about every successful social movement, from the women's suffrage movement to the civil rights movement and the women's liberation movements, all started from this kind of talk about shared experiences and struggles would seem to suggest that this insight into the possibility of social change through the development of new language would indeed have a certain amount of social utility (to speak from an SC perspective).

5. Reflections on our taken-for-granted worlds are vital to our future well-being. Given the socially constructed nature of the meaning worlds in which any of us lives, from a social constructionist point of view it is critically important to maintain a stance of critical reflection towards how we have come to understand reality, especially those aspects of our understanding that we never give much thought to because of how used to it we have become. This point is similar to the issue examined by Berger and Luckman as the "everyday life" that forms the backdrop against which all other perceptions are measured and evaluated for meaning. These everyday life understandings are so comfortable and habitual that they are taken for granted by us as the way things really are. The problem is that we live more and more in a society in which different cultures and ways of understanding receive widespread circulation through ever changing forms of communication. Without the kind of skeptical attitude toward our own assumptions, especially the more stubborn because more invisible assumptions that are "taken-for-granted", dialogue and openness to others becomes very difficult while misunderstanding and violence becomes more probable. The stance of critical reflection called for in this assumption means "the attempt to place one's premises into question, to suspend the 'obvious', to listen to alternative framings of reality, and to grapple with comparative outcomes of multiple standpoints."[28] As with the fourth assumption, there is a sense of hope here that developing such a critical stance towards our everyday way of seeing things may lead to real growth in the human

---

[27] Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 12.
[28] Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 12.

community: "This kind of critical reflection is not necessarily a prelude to rejecting our major traditions. It is simply to recognize them as traditions—historically and culturally situated; it is to recognize the legitimacy of other traditions within their own terms. And it is to invite the kind of dialogue that might lead to common ground."[29] This fifth assumption invites us to rediscover the practice of genuine humility as we encounter others who have perhaps been embedded in a different cultural milieu all of their life or even those within our own cultural setting with whom we have great disagreements. Perhaps the great cultural wars that have become so much a part of our everyday experience (at least in Western countries), wars between the right wing and the left wing or even the one discussed at the start of this paper between science and religion, would become less virulent and present more opportunities for mutual learning and growth if in humility we were more critical of our own taken-for-granted stances and more open to the possibility of truth existing within different points of view. This does not mean that the truth we see from our own point of view must necessarily be sublimated for the sake of the other but that, in genuine dialogue with an openness to the possibility of other truths, we may achieve a grasp on truth that is more nuanced and all-embracing of the meaning others have found in their own constructions of reality.

We have now reached the end of this fairly quick overview of the roots and nature of social constructionism as one example of the kind of philosophical paradigms that have formed the basis for the way many social scientists have come to see their task in research. What remains in this section of the paper is to provide a brief overview of the ways in which science is actually carried out from this point of view. It is perhaps important to start with how science in this tradition is still science and to stress what it has in common with more positivist oriented traditions in science. Science from an SC standpoint is still an empirical investigation conducted systematically and in such a way as to recognize bias involved at various levels of the data collection process so as to see through the distortions bias may produce in observation. As an empirical investigation, the data collection process in these approaches must still seek to make observation through the use of one or more of the five senses and would, therefore, exclude any sort of input that would not be available, at least in theory, to anyone who happened to be at the point of observation (e.g., data coming through an individual's 'sixth-sense' experience or through someone's inner experience of divine communication;…the person's verbal or written description of what they claim to have come to know through these means could serve as empirical data as could their observed behavior during such an episode, as long as the message itself was not taken as empirically verified).

On the other hand, scientific investigation from this point of view tends to take a different course in the procedures it uses, the kind of data it seeks to collect, and the way in which it goes on to analyze that data because of the fundamentally different way in which it sees the nature of reality, particularly human reality, the concern of the social sciences. For social constructionists, human reality does not exist out there as an objective reality which anyone can go out and

---

[29] Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 13.

measure (i.e., the positivist approach). Rather, human reality is a negotiated process of arriving at agreement about meaning within a particular social setting. What, then, is important to examine is the way in which people understand their existential situation: how do they make meaning out of their experiences and how do they know how to navigate through the social contexts of their lives? These kinds of questions require a certain depth of exploration into the uniqueness of the experience individuals and communities have encountered and the unique ways in which they have come to understand these experiences. As such, the traditional tools of positivistic science, surveys and experiments, seeking as they do to gather very small, quantifiable bits of information from large numbers of people for the sake of generalizing findings to larger populations would be inadequate to the task of discovering meaning at the level of depth and uniqueness sought by social constructionists.

Social scientists whose approach to investigation has been influenced by social constructionism have found that they need to listen to people, individually or in groups, telling their stories about themselves. This is a narrative process that takes considerably more time than asking survey questions that have a limited set of possible answers. In this approach it is the unique story that is being sought and the way in which the subjects of those stories have come to create meaning around their experiences from within the social contexts that supplies the context for their experiencing anything at all. The methods of data collection that are used to get at these stories tend to be those that provide more of a window into the richness of a person's experience and understanding. These range from conducting in-depth interviews with individuals to focus group sessions in which groups of people that share some common experience discuss what their lives are like and what they mean to various forms of observational process in which researchers simply watch people interacting in different social settings while taking notes or video/audio taping what they are observing. What these methods all have in common is the open-ended nature of the data collection process. Researchers do not approach the observational setting with either a theoretical point of view about how people will respond or with pre-determined response choices. This would be self-defeating from an SC researcher's point of view because they are in fact seeking to lift up the unique life experiences and interpretations of the individuals involved. At some late point in the process they may begin to see commonalities as they listen to different people's stories and these may help them form thematic expressions of how a social group has come to construct meaning, but that would still be very different from seeking to generalize to a larger population. Generalization is a probabilistic process based on sampling procedures and mathematical analysis of data. The nature of the data in social constructionist research would not allow for this kind of analysis because the data is, for the most part, in the form of words rather than numbers. The unique qualities of the stories individuals and groups are telling about their lives cannot be reduced to quantities and fit into a mathematical formula. Data analysis here tends to take on much more of a literary style of analysis: interviews are transcribed and transcripts are read and analyzed for the themes that emerge to indicate the ways in which life experiences have been interpreted and why meaning has been constructed the way it has.

Transcripts are compared, common themes are surfaced between them and dissonant interpretations are noted for the ways in which individual experiences may differ from a typical social trend. This would be much more like reading through Shakespeare's comedies to identify any themes that might emerge regarding, for instance, his attitudes towards women.

All in all, the approach taken by these social scientists is different because they are seeking a different kind of output. Rather than aiming to provide a probabilistic estimation about the extent to which results in an experiment or survey can be counted on to represent members of a larger population, these researchers seek to be able to understand and retell how a given social group or individuals within that group have constructed their meaning worlds in such a way and in such depth that the members of the social group or others who share similar circumstances and experiences will recognize themselves in the presentation. There is much more that could be said about how science is conducted from and SC point of view including the way these researchers, following upon Gergen's fifth assumption explained earlier, tend to be as conscious as possible of their own biases and the way in which these will tend to distort what is heard in the data collection process. It is hoped, however, that this review will provide enough of a flavor of how social constructionism has impacted upon the conduct of and reasoning behind scientific investigation. It has become, in a sense, science aimed at getting at meaning. I will now move on to examine how theological investigations have had a similar change of direction due to some of the very same influences that led to the impact social constructionism has had on science.

II.   Theological Investigations

The title of this part of the paper is intended to parallel that of the second part which was Scientific Investigations. Ironically and only partially intended, Theological Investigations also happens to be the title of Karl Rahner's great 23 volume exposition of systematic theology published between 1961 and 1992 (some volumes published posthumously). Rahner was a German Jesuit theologian born in 1904. He lived through both world wars and was compelled to leave Germany when the University of Innsbruck was closed by the Nazis in 1939. Returning after the war when the university was reopened, Rahner went on to become: "a theologian among theologians and a pastor among pastors. His importance was underlined by his role as an expert at Vatican Council II, both in its preparatory stages and during the Council sessions themselves."[30]

Rahner is of particular importance to the argument of this paper because he probably more than other theologians of his day may be said to be particularly aligned with the legacy of phenomenology and hermeneutics discussed previously. Rahner was a student of Heidegger's for four semesters while he was studying philosophy in Freiburg from 1934-1936.[31] The influence of Heidegger's approach to human experience is very evident in Rahner's

---

[30] Leo J. O'Donovan, "Preface," In *A World of Grace, An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, ed. Leo J. O'Donovan, (New York: Crossroad, 198), ix.

[31] Robert Masson, "Karl Rahner: A Brief Chronology." *Karl Rahner Society.* n.d. http://www.krs.stjohnsem.edu/KarlRahner.htm (accessed July 28, 2012), 4 of 5.

methodology. Rahner clearly discusses his methodology from this point of view in his attempt at a more popular presentation of his theology entitled *Foundations of Christian Faith*.[32] For this reason, although other theologians have also worked to engage modern thought in the construction of their theologies (e.g., Paul Tillich; Bernard Lonergan; Hans Kung), for the purposes of this paper the focus will remain on Rahner as an example of this kind of theology. My aims in this part of the paper are intentionally more modest due partly to the fact that I am not a professional theologian and also to the fact that Rahner's theology is complex and somewhat counterintuitive (as may be said of the phenomenology that preceded it). I do not intend to explore or explain Rahner's theology as such since that would be far beyond the scope of this paper and my own competence. The goal here is to highlight the methodological approach Rahner lays out as his task for his later theological investigations and to suggest the similarities that exist with the social constructionist approaches to scientific investigation, at least in terms of the motivational impetus for such investigations.

Rahner indicates early on that theology cannot start today from a standpoint that assumes a general agreement about the existence of God or belief in any particular doctrinal formulas that have come down through the history of religious traditions. Starting with these assumptions would be begging the question in a modern context where the existence of God and the historical authenticity of religious traditions have been so challenged. Theology can only be genuine "to the extent that it succeeds in establishing contact with the total secular self-understanding which man has in a particular epoch, succeeds in engaging conversation with it, in catching onto it, and in allowing itself to be enriched by it in its language and even more so in the matter of theology itself."[33] This requirement already resonates clearly with the assumptions made by social constructionists as described earlier. In order to do this, theology must start with the experience of what it is to be a conscious human subject because that is a position that has the potential to achieve agreement from anyone who thinks about their experience of being human.

In looking at the experience of human consciousness Rahner begins by examining the kind of knowledge someone has when they become conscious of an object in their field of awareness. This is a very similar starting place to that with which the phenomenologists and social constructionists began. According to Rahner, in any act of perception a person becomes aware not only of the object of awareness but they also become aware of themselves as the "I", as the person, who is perceiving the object and, at the same time, they are aware of the fact that they are engaged in the act of knowing. All three types of knowing are present in any act of knowing an object but they are known differently. In addition, all of this knowing occurs within a context of knowing that is also present with every act of knowledge:

---

[32] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith, An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity,* Trans. William V. Dych, New York: Crossroad, 1985.
[33] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 8.

> To know the object and to know myself and to know my own act of knowledge—
> all of these imply a context or a situation within which they are known. And this
> context is given, not inferred, just as the subject and the act of knowing and the
> object are given. The context is given "non-thematically," i.e., like the subject
> and its acts, it is not the "theme" or the focus of my consciousness.[34]

In other words, of all of these elements present in the consciousness of an object it is only the
object itself that we are explicitly aware of. The other elements are all hidden in each act of
knowing as the pre-condition for our being able to be aware of anything. This is what is meant
by these other forms of knowledge being "non-thematic" in the sense that they do not form the
theme of what we are aware of but they exist as a kind of backdrop to our awareness that, while
present, we are not explicitly aware of. This is so even when we think about ourselves and make
ourselves the object of knowledge. As Rahner states:

> Moreover, even if this knower in an act of reflection explicitly makes the co-
> known self-presence of the subject and his knowing the object of a new act of
> knowledge, the same thing happens again. This new act itself, which makes the
> subjective co-consciousness the object of the subsequent act in a conceptual way,
> also includes once again such an original self-presence of the subject and his
> knowledge of this second, reflexive act as the condition of its possibility, as its
> subjective pole.[35]

In all of this, the similarity to the analysis of consciousness by phenomenologists, particularly
Heidegger, and later the social constructionists is fairly obvious, particularly in reference to the
ever present social context in which perception takes place and the "taken-for-granted" nature of
our assumptions.

From this foundation of understanding the kinds of knowledge present in any particular
awareness, Rahner moves on to lay out what he sees as the structures of consciousness that
follows upon this insight. By this he means to describe the characteristics of human
consciousness can be inferred from the self-presence (his term for the awareness of self that is
given in the act of knowing an object) that is part of all knowledge: what it is like from the inside
to be conscious in this way? Rahner sees several of these structures emerging in distinct but
related ways from this analysis. These will be taken one at a time in what follows.

1. The experience of self-presence is one of being a person and a subject: In the act of
knowing, a person experiences himself or herself as a person who is the subject of the act of
knowing. This first characteristic is really just another way of naming the original experience of
self-presence: a person receives themselves in the act of consciousness by becoming aware of
their personhood over and against the object of consciousness. Rahner quickly admits that this is

---

[34] Michael J. Buckley, "Within the Holy Mystery," in *A World of Grace, An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, ed. Leo J. O'Donovan (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 35-36.
[35] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 18.

something of an ambiguous experience, especially but not exclusively from a modern point of view, because humans are also very aware of how contingent they are, how dependent upon forces and realities outside of themselves. Modern sciences of every sort tend to work towards explaining everything about human life by means of some lower orders of causality. Despite this, however, Rahner declares that it is precisely in this consciousness of having been derived from what is outside that the experience of personhood is underlined or affirmed:

> In the fact that man raises analytical questions about himself and opens himself to the unlimited horizons of such questioning, he has already transcended himself and every conceivable element of such an analysis or of an empirical reconstruction of himself. In doing this he is affirming himself as more than the sum of such analyzable components of his reality. Precisely this consciousness of himself, this confrontation with the totality of all his conditions, and this very being-conditioned show him to be more than the sum of his factors.[36]

In this element of rising above all constituent factors in the act of knowing and questioning, human consciousness opens up and opens out to unlimited potential for experiencing being. This is the subject of the next structure Rahner describes.

2. The experience of self-presence is one of transcendence: In all of this experience of self-presence Rahner continually sees the evidence for the transcendent nature of human reality. The meaning of this characteristic, transcendence, is not immediately obvious and it is important to understand how Rahner is using the term. By transcendence he is not referring to some mythical or almost comic book presentation of the greatness of the human in superman form. Humans always remain embedded within their historical context and within the vortex of the many natural and historical factors from which they have derived. Humans are always contingent and finite. Transcendence enters into human experience, however, at exactly this point in which they are aware of their finite nature. In this awareness of limitation and dependence they already show that they have gone beyond the boundaries of a purely finite reality, i.e., they transcend their finite limitations in the awareness of being finite. As Rahner notes, a truly finite reality is not transcendent: "A finite system cannot confront itself in its totality…It does not ask questions about itself. It is not a subject. The experience of radical questioning and man's ability to place himself in question are things which a finite system cannot accomplish."[37] This is the point of differentiation for humans:

> In spite of the finiteness of his system man is always present to himself in his entirety. He can place everything in question. In his openness to everything and anything, whatever can come to expression can be at least a question for him. In the fact that he affirms the possibility of a merely *finite* horizon of questioning, this possibility is already surpassed, and man shows himself to be a being with an *infinite* horizon. In the fact that he experiences his finiteness radically, he reaches

---

[36] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 29.
[37] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 30.

> beyond this finiteness and experiences himself as a transcendent being, as spirit. The infinite horizon of human questioning is experienced as an horizon which recedes further and further the more answers man can discover.[38]

Rahner goes on to explain that it is possible in various ways for a person to ignore this transcendent quality of their consciousness, but that fact never cancels out the reality of "the mysterious infinity which opens up before him in his questions."[39]

It should be noted that it is this experience of transcendence that Rahner identifies with *spirit* and that, ultimately, this transcendent (non-thematic) consciousness of transcendence is what Rahner is referring to when he speaks of the spiritual nature of humans. Being spirit, however, is still an experience of limitation while it is, at the same time, identifiable with transcendence. The nature of this limitation also has to do with the fact that human beings do continue to question their existence within their transcendent character. Humans have not and never will reach the point at which they will have all the answers. Every set of answers gives way to more questions. It is something like always wondering what is over the next hill. We never reach a point at which we are not able to leap over any sort of boundary to wonder what is over the next hill. In terms of being a transcendent spirit, then, the human is "the spirit who experiences himself as spirit in that he does not experience himself as *pure* spirit. Man is not the unquestioning and unquestioned infinity of reality."[40] As Carr goes on to clarify: "We experience ourselves as subjects who do not create ourselves and the space in which we live. We seem rather to be those who receive being in limited, contingent fashion as a gift from the foundation of being beyond ourselves."[41]

So, at one and the same time in this non-thematic (and therefore always ignorable) element of consciousness, humans are aware not only of their own spiritual nature, they are also un-thematically aware of this mysterious infinite source of the reality that they continue to encounter as they keep climbing over every hill by means of their questioning all provisional boundaries. This infinite source Rahner will ultimately identify as the Holy Mystery which is typically named as God but which never ceases to be Mystery by the naming. By their nature, transcendent and personal, humans are at all moments consciously, albeit in a non-thematic way, open to the infinite reality of Being, the Holy Mystery, God. The remainder of Rahner's theology is constructed from this foundational understanding about the nature of human beings as being open to God understood in this way (and not in some mythologized conceptual way) as the Holy Mystery. One final characteristic of human consciousness, beyond personhood and transcendence, remains to be explored.

---

[38] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 31-32.
[39] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 32.
[40] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 32.
[41] Anne E. Carr, "Starting with the Human," in *A World of Grace, An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, ed. Leo J. O'Donovan (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 21-22.

3. The experience of self-presence is one of being a free and responsible: The third of Rahner's structures of consciousness has to do, again in an un-thematic form, with the awareness of transcendental freedom. In that humans experience themselves in every act of knowledge as present to themselves, as persons, and as transcendent in their ability to question all contingent reality, they are also in that experience aware of themselves as given over to themselves in freedom, as not compelled to respond in one way or another to reality as given by the experience of being. The freedom Rahner has in mind here is not the kind of everyday freedom to make choices between specific options (although a lifetime of making such choices may reveal the way in which transcendent freedom has been actualized). Instead, this freedom has the same character as the experience of personhood and transcendence in that it characterizes the awareness of self-presence that is at one pole of the subject-object relationship in consciousness. As with these others, we are not able to directly inspect or observe our freedom on this level. It has to do with the whole person, what one makes of oneself or decides about oneself, in the midst of all of the circumstances and challenges posed by the limitations and opportunities of our concrete existence. It has to do with how one faces the ongoing transcendental experience of being as that comes to us out of the mystery of the infinite horizon of reality discussed in the last section. As such it is about the person in their entirety and not about them at any one particular moment or in any one particular action. As Rahner explains it:

> Freedom always concerns the person as such and as a whole. The object of freedom in its original sense is the subject himself, and all the decisions about objects in his experience of the world around him are objects of freedom only insofar as they mediate this finite subject in time and space to himself. When freedom is really understood, it is not the power to be able to do this or that, but the power to decide about oneself and to actualize oneself.[42]

What Rahner means by deciding about and actualizing oneself is clarified by Carr:
> Our explicit or implicit decision to accept or reject what we have been given entails our responsible freedom whether we realize it or not. Cynicism or hope, despair or courage, indifference or love in the face of concrete circumstances shape our lives, indeed our very selves. We are in our own hands, and this kind of freedom cannot be escaped.[43]

In a very real sense, then, we are given over to ourselves in a way that allows us to ultimately fashion the type of person we shall become in terms of our basic stance of openness or closed-ness to the mysterious source of reality that we continually encounter in our transcendence. This opens up many avenues of thought for a later development of ethics in terms of habits of being or virtues. While who we are or what we will become cannot be located in one particular act, the kinds of habits we allow to grow up in our lives, habits of love versus selfishness, habits of

---

[42] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 38.
[43] Carr, "Starting with the Human," 26.

justice versus injustice, habits of activity versus inactivity, habits of prayer versus habits of living in denial of our openness to the mysterious source of infinite reality, all of these habits represent ways in which, over time and in the space we occupy, we actualize our transcendent freedom and become the person we have made ourselves to be.

While all of this freedom and responsibility to make ourselves who we are may seem overwhelming and as almost 'too much responsibility' (what if I screw it up?), Rahner ends his exposition of his anthropology by noting again the transcendent nature of all of this experience and the fact that we never fully grasp ourselves as we are or in terms of what we are becoming:

> …no matter how fully we exercise our transcendence in creative lives, we are constantly receiving our very existence from an unknown source beyond our control. What we make of our lives is always a kind of compromise or synthesis between available possibilities on the one hand and our own consciousness and freedom on the other. And what we make of our lives is never fully comprehended or completely open to our introspective assessment. We remain unknown even to ourselves, not in this or that part of our lives, but in their ultimate totality, in what the subject of all our experience finally is. To the extent that we do approach the truth of ourselves, it with the awareness that we are not entirely in our own hands.[44]

This ends this exploration of Karl Rahner's anthropological insights into the nature of human consciousness following upon his analysis of the types of knowledge available in any act of awareness of a particular object. While this discussion has ranged well beyond the starting point of the similarities between Rahner's analysis of human consciousness and those of social constructionism emerging from its roots in phenomenology, my hope is that the detail of this presentation of Rahner's thought (still only extremely rudimentary) will have a twofold effect. The first is what has already been mentioned about the similarities between Rahner and Social Constructionism at least in terms of the analytical approach towards human perception as a basis for understanding the social and historical embedded-ness of the human experience of reality. The other hoped for effect is how evident it is that Rahner has taken this same starting point and ended up going much farther and more accurately into the actual experience of human consciousness. To take an example, Berger and Luckman, in their groundbreaking presentation of Social Constructionism, specifically state: "Consciousness is always intentional; it always intends or is directed toward objects. We can never apprehend some putative substratum of consciousness as such, only consciousness of something or other."[45] While the fact that consciousness is always directed at an object is true, from Rahner's analysis it would seem more correct to say that this is only one pole, the objective pole, in the subject-object dynamic involved in the act of knowing an object and that Rahner is correct in pointing out the other kinds of knowledge (albeit non-thematic knowledge) available in the same act: the self-presence of the

---

[44] Carr, "Starting with the Human," 28.
[45] Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 20.

knower and the awareness of the act of knowing. It is clear that Berger and Luckman go on to use similar language when they speak of the reality of everyday life forming the context for individual perceptions of objects. It would seem that Rahner offers a new road into this other dimension of awareness that might open up the possibility for dialogue about the existential depths of human experience.

III. Conclusions

My original intention for this paper was to offer a possible new direction of thinking about how science and religion could possibly relate to each other by means of those elements in each area that have taken the same phenomenological starting point as the inspiration for the conduct of scientific investigations on the one hand and theological investigations on the other. These approaches in both fields have not been without controversy. In science, qualitative researchers inspired by social constructionism and other similar interpretive perspectives have had a long hard battle in gaining acceptance of their methods from peers in academia.[46] And Rahner's approach to theology has not always met with approval. Another popular German theologian, Hans Kung, for instance has written: "*Karl Rahner* in particular, at first the object of considerable hostility, had pressed forward with unusual courage in many theological fields…Rahner, too, subsequently got into serious difficulties with the Roman magisterium and was for a time placed directly under his order's Roman censorship."[47] Kung himself has famously run afoul of Roman authority and has, coincidentally perhaps, also adopted social constructionist ideas to the extent that he has incorporated the approach of one of the earliest and most famous examples of social constructionism applied to science in Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.[48]

However, social constructionism has been the guiding approach to many scholarly and popular attempts to delve into the social/historical roots of many taken-for-granted approaches to reality that have served to oppress and devalue people.[49] Much of this work has been done in an

---

[46] See also Steve Fuller, *Kuhn vs. Popper, The Struggle for the Soul of Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) and Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) for thorough discussions of potential problems with the social constructionist approach in science and society. Hacking's presentation of the dangers of a social constructionism in regards to a topic such as child abuse raises the concerns about the extent to which such tragedies could potentially be explained away through re-definition. None-the-less, as the novels of Dickens will attest as well as the movement to end child labor in the late 19th century, the concept of childhood and ideas of what constitute abuse have a distinctly historical character and the argument could be made that the awareness of child abuse and its subsequent decline have come upon changes in social consciousness and language as new constructions of reality have occurred over time.

[47] Hans Kung, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 520.

[48] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* 3rd. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); for Kung's use of Kuhn's concept of paradigms of thought see for example Hans Kung, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future* (New York: Continuum, 2004). Kung has continued to use this approach in his analysis of the history of Judaism and of Islam in separate titles.

[49] See for example Tracy E. Ore, *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006); also see Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*, 1) for a listing of the many different topics to which social constructionism has been applied.

effort to unmask the self-serving and power-maintaining status quo of social institutions that have been constructed within a particular paradigm of understanding reality that often end up excluding the understandings, insights and contributions of others. And in theology, much of the work of Rahner and other theologians have led the way to a renewal in theology that has allowed for a development in the understanding of the social and historical context of previous presentations of faith or creed and for attempts to re-contextualize the truth to be found in traditions by way of an engagement with modern or post-modern thought. All of this has had a lasting impact on not only science and religion but on many aspects of social life that are influenced by them.

I would like to end with an extended quotation from someone who might, at first, seem like an unlikely supporter of the "radical" ideas put forth by these new approaches to science and religion. C. S. Lewis, in writing about his own experience of prayer in the context of the modern world, observes the wall as he sits in his room:

> The walls, they say, are matter. That is, as the physicists will try to tell me, something totally unimaginable, only mathematically describable, existing in a curved space, charged with appalling energies. If I could penetrate far enough into that mystery I should perhaps finally reach what is sheerly real.

> And what am I? The façade is what I call consciousness. I am at least conscious of the colour of those walls. I am not, in the same way, or to the same degree, conscious of what I call my thoughts: for if I try to examine what is happening when I am thinking, it stops happening. Yet, even if I could examine my thinking, it would, I well know, turn out to be the thinnest possible film on the surface of a vast deep…

> Here again, if I could dive deeply enough, I might again reach at the bottom that which simply is.

> …Either mystery, if I could follow it far enough, would lead me to the same point—the point where something, in each case unimaginable, leaps forth from God's naked hand…

> And what, you ask, is the advantage of all of this? Well, for me—I am not talking about anyone else—it plants the prayer right in the present reality. For, whatever else is or is not real, this momentary confrontation of subject and object is certainly occurring: always occurring except when I am asleep. Here is the actual meeting of God's activity and man's—not some imaginary meeting that might occur if I were an angel or if God incarnate entered the room. There is here no question of a God "up there" or "out there"; rather, the present operation of God "in here," as the ground of my own being, and God "in there," as the ground of

the matter that surrounds me, and God embracing and uniting both in the daily miracle of finite consciousness.[50]

Bibliography

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckman. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966.

Buckley, Michael J. "Within the Holy Mystery." In *A World of Grace, An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, edited by Leo J. O'Donovan, 31-49. New York: Crossroad, 1984.

Burr, Vivien. *Social Constructionism.* 2nd. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Carr, Anne E. "Starting with the Human." In *A World of Grace, An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, edited by Leo J. O'Donovan, 17-30. New York: Crossroad, 1984.

Dych, William V. "Theology in a New Key." In *A World of Grace, An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, edited by Leo J. O'Donovan, 1-16. New York: Crossroad, 1984.

Fuller, Steve. *Kuhn vs. Popper, The Struggle for the Soul of Science.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Gergen, Kenneth J. *An Invitation to Social Construction.* Washington: Sage, 2009.

Hacking, Ian. *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Houghton, Peggy M., and Timothy J. Houghton. *The Chicago Manual of Style (CMS): The Easy Way!* Edited by Michele M. Pratt. Flint, MI: Baker College, 2008.

Kreuger, Larry W, and Lawrence W Neuman. *Social Work Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Applications.* New York: Pearson, 2006.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* 3rd. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Kung, Hans. *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future.* New York: Continuum, 2004.

—. *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today.* New York: Doubleday, 1980.

Lewis, C. S. *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer: Reflections on the Intimate Dialogue between Man and God.* New York: Harcourt, 1964.

Lock, Andy, and Tom Strong. *Social Constructionism: Sources and Stirrings in Theory and Practice.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Masson, Robert. "Karl Rahner: A Brief Chronology." *Karl Rahner Society.* http://www.krs.stjohnsem.edu/KarlRahner.htm (accessed July 28, 2012).

O'Donovan, Leo J. "Preface." In *A World of Grace, An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, edited by Leo J. O'Donovan, vii-xiii. New York: Crossroad, 1984.

Ore, Tracy E. *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality.* New York: McGraw Hill, 2006.

Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith, An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity.* Translated by William V. Dych. New York: Crossroad, 1985.

---

[50] C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer: Reflections on the Intimate Dialogue between Man and God* (New York: Harcourt, 1964), 78-80.