

Telling tales of relations

Inaugural address by Dian Marie Hosking

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So what is an orazie?...or, we could ask...how do we do an orazie... & **what is oratory?**

This painting shows Demosthenes, one of the ten great Attic orators, practising his oratorical art. The Shorter Oxford defines "oration" as - "*a formal speech or discourse – especially when delivered in connection with some special occasion*"

- as "*a prayer or petition to God*" &
- as *rhetoric*.

All three definitions are very relevant to what I have to say about " tales of relations". The first definition of oratory, refers to the speaking side of language; the second

definition links language - the word - or discursive activity with the sacred; the third links language & speaking with persuasion... Given these aspects, it seems a little odd that Demosthenes – or the painter of this painting – thinks it possible that oratory can be done on ones own, with no-one listening, & no possibility of persuasion!

I shall explore:

- aspects of language & communication, speaking & listening, dialectics & persuasion
- in relation to different ways of understanding what it is to be a person
- and how person, or Self relates to 'Other' or 'not self' – especially other persons

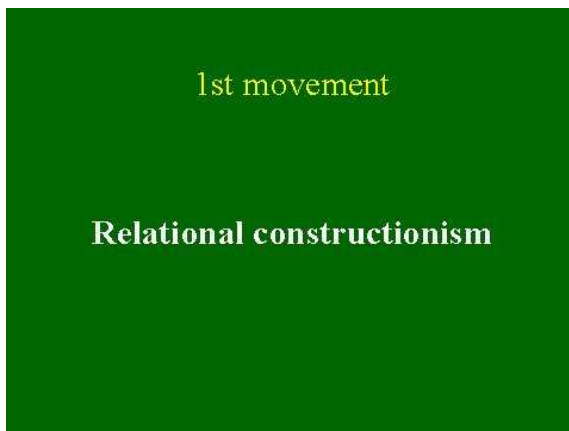
I began these explorations many years ago, in the context of a well known, contingency model of leadership which claimed to have evidence that showed leadership effectiveness was dependent on the relationship between the leader's style & 3 measured & defined aspects of the "leadership situation"

To cut a long story short, my empirical & analytic, work led me to conclude that a contingency approach

- gave too much emphasis to 1 person, the leader (or indeed, orator)
- over-emphasised the independence of the leader & his or her leadership situation, &
- over-emphasised stable conditions to the neglect of processes

These conclusions informed my subsequent empirical & theoretical work which has continued to explore inter-relatedness & relational processes and has developed into an examination of some pretty basic assumptions about what it is to be a person & how person & world interrelate.

My vehicle for these explorations has slowly emerged. It is a particular social science perspective or 'theory of theories' that some call "relational constructionism".



Relational constructionism:

The various themes of relational constructionism have been around for a very long time, and can be found in many diverse literatures and areas of practice including social psychology, micro sociology, communications, family therapy & organisation development... to name just a few.

Relational constructionism constitutes a very particular way of theorising the realities of persons & relations.



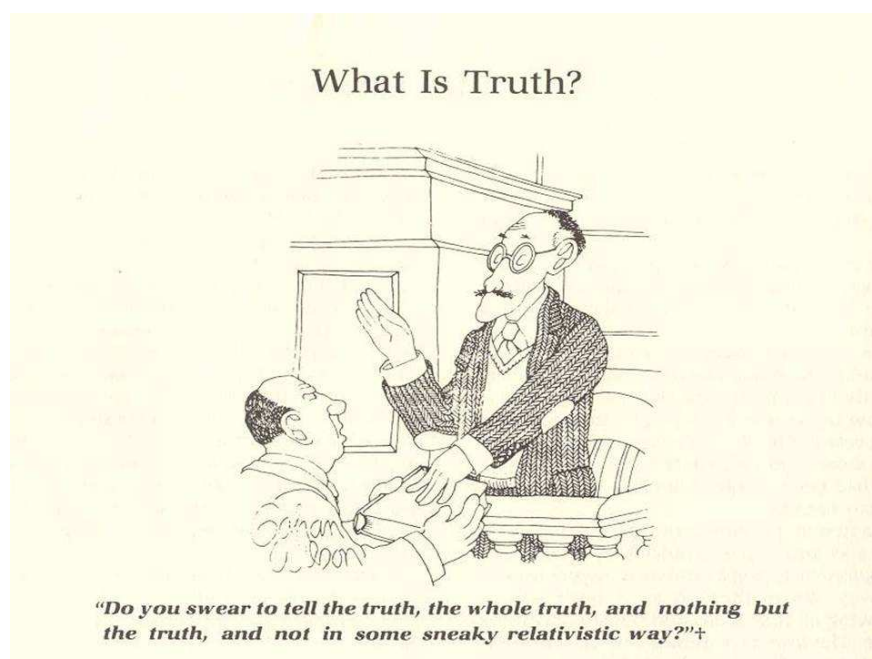
The theory assumes that people are always in the middle of constructing a particular self in some sort of relation with a particular other, for example self as scientist, acting-out community-based norms & interests, using community jargon...indeed, perhaps in the performance of an oration. In this view, persons act out multiple voices, voicing a different Self depending on the relevant relation(s) of the moment – scientist, leader, parent - in the performance of a university inaugural address or a festive reception & so on.

Constructing Self/other & relations is ongoing in all the many ways we live our lives - in all our actions – in which category I include writing & speaking – & in the arti-factual objects made in those activities. To illustrate, constructions get 'built': in the ways we relate to nature, for example, many cultures go about their lives without sharply differentiating secular & sacred, animal & human - Australian aboriginals have a strong connection with the landscape – which is part of their history & who they are - at the same time, other cultures relate to nature as a separate & secular Other – as an available resource to exploit;

Further, constructions get built in the ways we relate to other cultures or communities as they live out their different "forms of life" – in their different languages, different interests, different norms and values - so for example, we may relate in ways that construct 'different but equal'? - or one "form of life" may claim superiority – 'we were here first', 'our ways of knowing are superior to yours', 'we speak for global interests & you only have a local (parochial) view'...& so on. *This brings me to another key feature of constructionism which is that*

Relational realities are theorised as local.

But my reference to "local" has a very particular meaning - most simply put - it means not universal, singular & stable. So, the theory is *not* talking about the one way the world really is & unified knowledge of the same - i.e., objective knowledge that can exist without any knowing subject. This means that it is *not* talking about the same things as positive science with its assumption of, & interest in, the one 'real' world & universal, transcendental knowledge of the same. Rather, relational realities *are* theorised as local in the sense that they are specific to relational processes that construct what some might call "cultures", but which Wittgenstein called "forms of life".



Wittgenstein viewed "forms of life" as established social practices that involve their own communicative forms & interests, physical tools, rules and "language games". So, for example, science or social anthropology or Australian aboriginals can be viewed as particular

"forms of life"; similarly - & relating to this picture - the social practice of Justice **or** The **Law** can be viewed as 'putting to work' local-cultural distinctions between truth & fiction, fact & fantasy ... acted out in regularly repeated social conventions that involve 'swearing' on a Holy book & a very particular language game – in this case - of truth telling.

Relational realities are also viewed as "local" in a historical sense_ in that they are always in construction i.e., always in the process of becoming - both re-constructing stabilities & possibilities together with changes in particular "forms of life". This orazie is in process - reconstructing particular social conventions & forms - & so, for example, an academic "form of life". Similarly - speaking & listening were once the dominant forms of communication ... but reading & looking have become much more dominant - using power point presentations would not have been possible or part of the production of an orazie perhaps even 10 years ago ...we are all 'in the middle' of ways of relating that have become taken-for-granted...whilst at the same time, new possible taken-for-granted are emerging. *This introduces another aspect of relational constructionist theory, which is that*

Persons participate in making relational realities - they both contribute to making local-cultural, local-historical realities & are made by them - in other words, and this is key- *it is in ongoing relational processes that persons & worlds are co-constructed as relational realities.*

Last, I should perhaps stress that in this "tale" of relations, relational constructionism is about the here & now_processes of history making –making self/other & relationships. This aspect may become more evident in our "second movement" – which outlines some key themes in Western-cultural constructions of self/other & relations- themes with more or less complex variations & more or less 'loud' in different historical contexts. As Latour & many others have suggested, these themes have centred questions about minds & form¹. Rehearsing them introduces our 3rd movement & another question - one that asks how multiple local "forms of life" can co-construct 'different but equal' relations².

¹ Latour Science in Action

² later I will put this in terms of soft self/other differentiation

2nd movement

Some tales of the West

So, let me say a little about 5 key western cultural themes

The first is the common western-cultural focus on Being - the assumption of being rather than becoming has long dominated Western philosophy in both its Anglo-American & Continental variants³. The American social psychologist Edward Sampson spoke of common western practices that centre The Self & treat The Self as separate from Other⁴ - from Other people & objects. These practices construct Self & Other as relatively stable, bounded, singular and independently existing entities, for example, leaders are spoken of as individuals who have certain characteristics that distinguish them from non-leaders...characteristics such as charisma, the powers of persuasion, the ability to "transform" others through their individual transformational leadership behaviours & so on. These practices together construct "the self contained individual"...& the characteristics that define the self contained individual include, including

Rationalism & mind-body dualism – my second theme

To explore this a little, let me remind you of Descartes' famous assertion "I think therefore I am"⁵. You could say that it both celebrates 'I' as a separate & bounded existence & centres I

³ Sartre wrote of Being & Nothingness, not becoming & nothingness

⁴ Chogyam Trungpa spoke of **this & that thinking** –

⁵ *Cogito ergo sum* is a translation of Descartes' original statement: "*Je pense, donc je suis*", which occurs in his Discourse on Method (1637). The phrase "*Cogito ergo sum*" is not used in Descartes' most important work

think, or in other words, thinking as an *individual* activity - as a solitary & internal mind operation. Cartesian dualism assumed that bounded & independently existing individuals with knowing minds build their knowledge about Other. The knowing mind builds 'knowledge

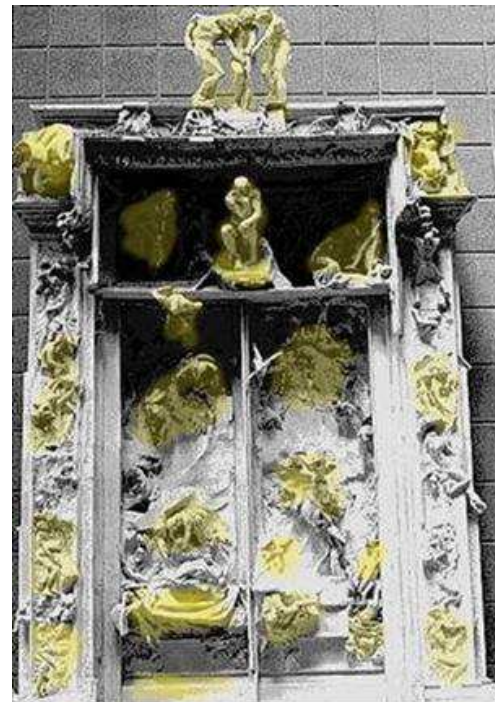
that' – or 'aboutness knowledge',- nowadays often spoken of as "intellectual property" or "intellectual capital" & viewed as a personal & secular possession.



Rodin's sculpture of "The thinker" was originally positioned in the middle of the tympanum⁶ - the place where, in Christian tradition, God the Father is usually positioned. Perhaps Rodin wished to elevate man above God as the fount of knowledge about the world

-or more particularly, to position 'rational *man*', as one who can have a "'gods eye view' from nowhere"⁷.

Descartes' interest was in producing certain knowledge about the world 'in its so being' – he proposed the (disembodied) rational mind as the way to produce such knowledge - such knowledge could then provide the basis for rational action. This emphasis on rationalism & the knowing mind goes together in varying ways with my third theme which **centres the bounded individual as an observer** who builds empirical knowledge of the 'outside' world,



(Meditations on First Philosophy). Needless to say, there is a great deal of interpretive space about Descartes meaning & more or less simplistic constructions are offered.

⁶ The gates of hell

⁷ Quoting - out of context but perhaps preserving the meaning - the philosopher Hilary Putnam.

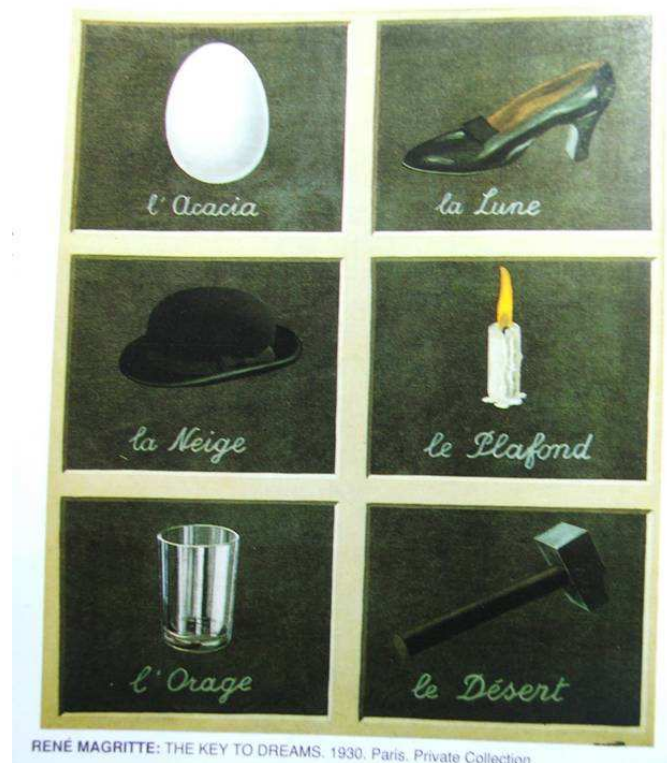


of the world "outside" their knowing mind that is, & so – knowledge of their (singular) Self & knowledge of (a separate) Other – other people, nature & so on. Perhaps Magritte was playing with this idea in his painting of an eye that reflects the natural world 'out there' – as it really is...available to be known

& re-presented. Within the human sciences, Behaviourism was perhaps the 'hardest' or most extreme version of **empiricism** -asserting that the scientific observer should confine his or her empirical research & theorising to that which was directly observable (in other words, that could be known without the constructive interference of in-visible mind operations). In addition, great emphasis was given to **visual observation & visual forms of communication** such as written language & visual inscriptions of various kinds (maps, books, formulae etcetera). These visual forms, together with an emphasis on appearances, have gradually come to dominate western social practices as they construct & re-construct Self/Other & relations. This in turn, has been linked: to the gradual "**dis-enchantment of the world**", meaning the construction of a dead, secularised, de-natured universe separate from, & capable of being observed & known by a non-participating Cartesian subject⁸

This brings me to my Fourth theme: which concerns **the role of conceptual language** - as a tool that can represent reality.

⁸ See, for example, writings by Morris Berman, Peter Reason, & my own recent & forthcoming publications



The dominant story here is that bounded, knowing individuals use language to more or less accurately 'map' existences⁹ and, as I just noted – Visual inscription, especially written language, is especially important and is widely regarded as a means to re-present things & relations - people, physical objects, events - out of time^{10 11} So, this Magritte painting could be viewed as drawing our attention to the widely held expectation that words represent or stand in for objects & events. The philosopher Richard Rorty deconstructed these themes in his well known text "Philosophy & the mirror of nature" ... treating analytical philosophy as a "language game" – which assumes language can mirror an outside & independently existing world.

Last, our self-contained individual can use his or her knowledge to engage in what our fifth theme calls "world structuring". This refers to what the bounded individual, as a knowing agent, is supposed to be able to do with their knowledge ... use it to influence or achieve 'power over' Other. For example, leaders can use their knowledge to re-structure leadership

⁹ including one's own Self & one's own body.

¹⁰ stripped from their progression in ongoing processes

¹¹ In science this is called "objectivism" –an approach in which, to quote Hermans & his colleagues : "language is needed to express concepts mapped onto objects, properties & relations in a literal, unequivocal, context-independent fashion"

situations - but if Other is not convinced by rationality of the leader or change agents case – then all the knowing individual can do is increase his attempts to achieve more 'power over' other!

To summarise & bring these themes together, the dominant variation of these themes has been referred to as a Subject-Object construction: the knowing Subject acts towards Other as knowable & formable Object... One voice, one "form of life", dominates. The S-O construction "celebrates the self" whilst simultaneously constructing "serviceable others". The term hard Self & Other differentiation has also been used.

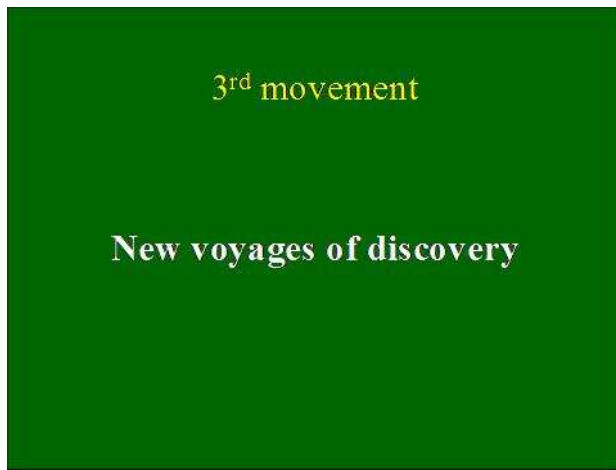
Subject/Object constructions have been softened in many different ways in different areas of practice^{12, 13}

however, & this is very important, these 'softenings' continue to focus on being rather than becoming, on epistemology rather than ontology, & and on the speaking & world structuring aspects of construction. My interest is different: my work focuses on the becoming aspects of local relational realities¹⁴ - as ontologies & not 'mind stuff' and, in particular, in exploring soft self/other differentiation as **ways of relating** that are open & appreciative. Happily, a relational constructionist perspective – unlike other perspectives - permits the development of "vehicles" for such explorations”

¹² for example, in the philosophy of science – where naïve realism & hard line empiricism were reconstructed in to critical realism & positivism and in cognitive science, where rationalism & empiricism are no longer discoursed as binary opposites & embodied approaches to mind are growingly common

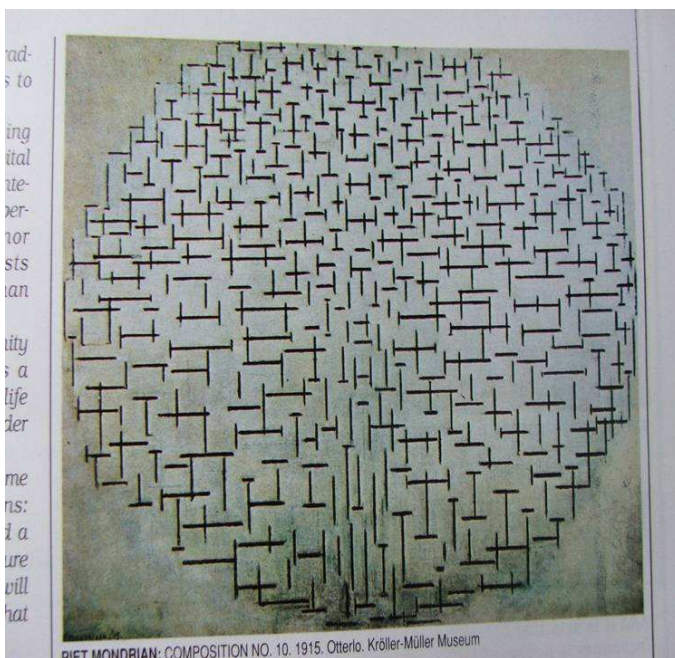
¹³ and the last twenty years or so have produced a widespread "turn to text" - reflected, for example, in the blossoming of discourses about "discursive mind", humans as story tellers, narratives as habitations and re-storying approaches to change, metaphor and social practices & metaphorical approaches to organisational change....

¹⁴ Of course, I could say - "becoming processes" –which in English means attractive (in Dutch both meanings also seem to be used: *sieren & worden*)



The first "vehicle": works with constructions in process

Relational constructionism theorises the process as the product - the process of leadership, of an orazie, of research, or of community development...is viewed as a process of constructing more or less local realities & relations. Furthermore, in focussing on relations, the theory makes no figure-ground distinction – no *a priori* privilege is given to any one particular voice or "form of life" – the leaders, the scientists', the teacher's, or the consultant's...



Quoting from Mondrian, whose painting this is:

"everything is composed by relation & reciprocity.

(colour) exists only through another colour; dimension is defined by another dimension. There is no position except in opposition to another position".

The second vehicle: allows & invites multiplicity

So, for example, leadership processes & processes of community & organisational change need to be slow, spacious & appreciative for multiple local "forms of life" to manifest in equal relations – as in Arvo Pert's music 'Spiegel im Spiegel'. So, for example, work of this sort no longer constructs a distinction between 'finding out' & then implementing, between processes & outcomes. Methodologies include, for example, Appreciative Inquiry, Participative Action Research, Collaborative Inquiry & Appreciative evaluation...

The third vehicle: involves embodied listening, openness & appreciation. Hard self/other differentiation & interests in structuring have been linked to western philosophy's "one-sided" attention to "logos" & the speaking (rather than listening) side of language¹⁵. For example, the Italian philosopher Corradi Fiumara – together with Heidegger, Ernest Berendt, Walter Ong & many others – call for more attention to the listening side of language - but listening now in a very special sense - not listening for something but listening with - what Heidegger spoke of as "letting lie" rather than grasping & re-constructing some social practice or language game in relation to the norms & values from one's own – different - "form of life". Listening as "letting lie" is strongly related to openness & appreciation –which are vital for the construction of soft self-other differentiation. Falzon, commenting on Foucault's work on dialogue, noted that:

"Openness is key to a genuine encounter with other...other possible selves, other humans...the world " (Falzon, 1998)

Appreciation might be theorised as an *orientation towards openness & exploring possibilities* without getting into any kind of good/bad, right/wrong kinds of re-construction -'letting lie' the different constructions of different forms of life - rather than 'working them' in relation to one's own¹⁶

Taken together, these vehicles can re-construct the dominant metaphor of mind as the mirror of nature. Instead of the bounded individual being able to mirror an external world... a very visual, hierarchical & static metaphor - relational constructionism, together with the vehicles I have outlined, make a **sound metaphor** possible. Let us listen again to Arvo Pert's composition *Spiegel im Spiegel*

¹⁵ Corradi Fiumara

¹⁶ Not neutral, value-free description & not valuing this & de-valuing that

Arvo Pert music

The parts have equal weight: the part for the stringed instrument¹⁷ is constructed in phrases that *mirror* one another & the piano mirrors the violin - each 'going on' only in responsive relation with the other. Arvo Pert remarked of his work:

*"I could compare my music to white light which contains all colours. Only a prism can divide the colours and make them appear; this prism could be the spirit of the listener"*¹⁸

Thank you for listening.

¹⁷ sometimes a violin, sometimes a viola

¹⁸ maybe listening, openness, & appreciation allow the mirror to be clear & free of obscurations!

Further reading

This orazie is based upon ideas developed in various written publications. The interested reader is referred to the writings below (also to be found on www.relational-constructionism.org/publications):

Hosking, D.M. Relational practices of change: between politics and aesthetics. In: *Relational processes*. Steyaert, C. & van Looy, B. eds. Sage, in press.

Hosking, D.M. Can constructionism be critical? in Holstein, J. & Gubrium, J. eds. *Handbook of Constructionist Research*. NY: Guilford Publications. In press

Hosking, D.M. Sound constructs: a relational discourse. *Revue Sciences de Gestion*. in press.

Gergen, K. J. & Hosking, D.M. If You Meet Social Construction Along the Road: A Dialogue with Buddhism. In *Horizons in Buddhist Psychology*. Kwee, M., Gergen, K.J., and Koshikawa, F. eds. Taos Institute Publications, 2006.