

Ellett and Ericson Meet Pirandello, Or, Six Subplots in Search of a Theme

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According to *The Devil's Dictionary*, an egotist is someone who is more interested in himself than he is in *me*. It is obvious, then, that Fred Ellett and Dave Ericson are far from being egotistical, for they certainly talk about me — Denis Phillips — quite a lot. Although I find this flattering (and as nothing more than my due), I have unfortunately detected three problems here. First, I did not recognize much of me in the D.C. Phillips whom they discuss; second, they should not have discussed me at all; and, third, they discuss too many other people along with me, without a clear rationale. They should, in my opinion, have discussed only one of these — Catherine Elgin and her fascinating and, dare I say, controversial book chapter “The Merits of Equilibrium.”¹

I have attempted to sum all this up in my title, which is of course a reference to Luigi Pirandello's famous play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Here are six of the many plots or subplots that can be found in their essay and that have the effect of obscuring rather than illuminating their theme:

1. In 1995 Phillips produced a framework for understanding constructivist positions that — although it has some meritorious features — is unable to find a place for pragmatic realism.²
2. Phillips (presumably in the two essays of his that are referenced) develops and/or defends a Popper-Phillips position in epistemology, one that is deficient when compared with pragmatic realism.
3. Kant is a type of constructivist, and Aristotle should be contrasted with Popper.
4. The use of tables can advance the discussion of deep and/or subtle epistemological and ontological positions, and may even substitute for detailed discussion of the issues.
5. Lorin Anderson and David Krathwohl, presumably like Benjamin Bloom before them, reject the epistemic position that knowledge is justified true belief and opt instead for the view that knowledge is recall.³
6. The writer on evaluation, Michael Patton, has been misled by Tom Schwandt who says that nowadays we are all realists; Schwandt is misleading because there are more types of realism than he supposed.⁴

These six plots serve to obscure the theme of their essay and do not work toward establishing its validity. With some trepidation, I am taking the theme to be the one announced in their title — “Education and Pragmatic Realism” — and in the closing lines of the essay: “we hope we have given some good reasons for thinking that (the reinvented) pragmatic realism might offer a new and plausible ‘constructivist’

approach for educators in their attempt to get clear about a viable conception of knowledge.” At other places they indicate that their theme is establishing that the framework I developed to clarify some issues about constructivism cannot accommodate pragmatic realism, but they never establish this, nor do they deliver on their promise to offer a suggestion about modifying the framework. If Ellett and Ericson had abandoned their irrelevant subplots, they could have devoted more of their time to pursuing the two crucial issues that seem closest to their hearts, but which they only *assert* but *do not establish*, namely, that Catherine Elgin’s epistemology is viable and that it is helpful for educational researchers.

PLOT 1: THE VIABILITY OF THE ER FRAMEWORK

By 1995, many hundreds of authors had identified themselves as supporting a constructivist position, but the situation was, to put it mildly, extremely confusing for it was far from clear what was meant by the key term “constructivist.” It was not apparent that all these authors were discussing the same thing. Hence, in my *Educational Researcher* article, I tried to bring some clarity to the field by offering a framework — an explicitly descriptive and nonjudgmental (that is, an a-critical) framework — according to which the various forms of constructivism were complex positions that each could be viewed as being located on three axes or continua at once. Then I illustrated the usefulness of this tripartite analytic framework by discussing where a number of disparate thinkers would be situated within it — John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, Ernst von Glasersfeld, Thomas Kuhn, Bruno Latour, Helen Longino, Lynn Hankinson Nelson, and Sandra Harding. Locke received moderately detailed attention, for I regarded him as only marginally constructivist, and so his case was informative. I included Karl Popper along with these other luminaries as an example, but he received almost the shortest amount of attention of the lot. I certainly did not endorse his position, nor any of the others, and in this essay I certainly did not expound my own position on the various issues that were raised about constructivism. My purpose was solely the descriptive/analytic one of elucidating the issues that were at stake in constructivism and showing where various exemplars stood.

My essay appeared some time before Catherine Elgin’s two books that develop her version of pragmatic realism, so I did not use her as one of my illustrative examples.⁵ Let me do so now (ever so briefly); Ellett and Ericson claim that my framework cannot accommodate her, but they never actually attempted to locate her within the framework.

The first of the three axes of my 1995 framework was meant to depict the fact that some constructivists are focused upon the psychological issue of how a learner constructs his or her own cognitive contents or understanding, while others are focused upon knowledge “writ large,” that is, upon the construction or development of the public domains of knowledge sometimes called “the disciplines” — the domain where epistemology as traditionally understood is often brought to bear. Some writers seem to believe that they can address both the psychological and the disciplinary/epistemic poles with the one constructivist theory. Given the frequency with which she uses the term “epistemology” in her essay, it seems pretty clear

(although it is not absolutely clear) where Catherine Elgin should be located on this first axis.

The second of my axes, along which many great figures are scattered, has at one pole the view that knowledge is *imposed by*, or *copied from*, the environment or from a “reality” external to the knower; those who are at or close to this pole are nonconstructivist in orientation. At the other pole, or near it, are clustered those thinkers who believe that knowledge is *made or constructed* by solitary inquirers or by communities of inquirers (these are often called, nowadays, “epistemic communities”). It is clear both from the examples that she uses and from the way she discusses them that Elgin belongs at or near this constructivist pole. (I note, by way of clarification, that in my essay I neither discussed nor assessed anybody’s ontology, whether Elgin’s, Popper’s, Kuhn’s, Dewey’s, or even Kant’s or Latour’s.)

My third axis contrasted passive absorption with active construction, the activity being physical or intellectual or both. It seems to me that Elgin, like all constructivists, is located at the “active” pole.

There were other important subtleties in my schema, but you get the point — it seems to be able to accommodate Elgin. Whether it is useful to make this accommodation is another matter, one that Ellett and Ericson do not address. But I also need to stress the point that, if the chief interest is to argue that her framework is viable, the whole matter of her location in my descriptive framework is irrelevant — so why raise it at all?

PLOT 2: THE PHILLIPS-POPPER EPISTEMIC FRAMEWORK HAS DEFICIENCIES

I will argue that this thesis is patently incorrect and for a very simple reason: There is no such framework developed in my two essays on constructivism that are referenced (although I am flattered that Ellett and Ericson judge me to be capable of developing such a framework). As I stated previously, the point of my framework was entirely descriptive or clarificatory and it was not an exercise in advocacy. After receiving Ellett and Ericson’s essay, I assiduously undertook the pleasant task of carefully rereading my 1995 essay, and I am at a loss to identify the grounds on which the two authors assert that I was developing a substantive Popperian position. Furthermore, I am at a loss as to why they devote such a large space to Sir Karl in their discussion at all, since I make only a brief reference to him and then entirely for illustrative purposes.

PLOT 3: KANT, ARISTOTLE, AND POPPER

I have very little to say here, beyond stating the obvious point that Kant, Aristotle, and Popper are interesting philosophers, worthy of discussion; but as the argument developed by Ellett and Ericson stands, the relevance of these luminaries — or sub-luminaries, according to one’s assessment of their respective contributions — is not established. For example, the relevance of the outcome of the comparison of Aristotle and Popper contributes nothing to establishing the viability or usefulness of the pragmatic realist position developed by Catherine Elgin — the authors would have been better off directly assessing the validity of her argument about specks and swells (a task that they avoid altogether), or in discussing her

notion of reflective equilibrium, or in making clear her “imperfect procedural epistemological” stance.

PLOT 4: THE USE OF TABLES IN EPISTEMOLOGICAL
AND ONTOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS

I shall also pass over this point without saying much. Authors are, of course, free to use any expository devices that they choose; but personally I do not find philosophical tables helpful, unless (and it is an important proviso) the groundwork has been thoroughly laid and the positions that are placed in summary form in the table have been clearly expounded and analyzed. The use of a table is a supplement to, and not a replacement for, such detailed preparatory discussion.

PLOT 5: ANDERSON, KRATHWOHL, AND BLOOM,
THEIR TAXONOMIES, AND KNOWLEDGE AS RECALL

The *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* and its various later manifestations was a *taxonomy*, a framework, and it was *not* a bungled attempt to do epistemology. It was a work aimed at helping curriculum developers and test-construction folk get clear about what they mean in claiming that an aim was of the form “the student shall display knowledge of Newton’s first law of motion.” Sometimes this meant that the student should simply be able to recall the wording of Newton’s law; at other times this meant that the student should be able, for example, to use the law to solve relevant problems, to apply the law to new cases not covered in the classroom or the text, or to understand the evidence for the truth of the law. In other words the *Taxonomy* was similar to a dictionary, and it was never intended to be a handbook in epistemology. And there are grounds for thinking the taxonomy, despite its faults and despite some of the educational uses to which it was put, got many things right — when in ordinary parlance I say that I know the date of the Norman conquest, sometimes what I am saying is that I can recall that it was 1066. But once again, the relevance of Bloom to the validity or otherwise of Elgin’s epistemology is far from clear.

PLOT 6: PATTON WAS MISLED BY SCHWANDT
WHO SAID WE ARE ALL REALISTS

Although this brief, last portion of the essay is a red herring, it is worth commenting upon, for it seems to be pioneering a new form of argument: “Patton was misled when he cited Schwandt on realism, because there are more forms of realism than Schwandt realized.” To bring out the form of this argument, I will take the liberty of illustrating it with a simple example from closer to home: “Denis saying that ‘*all members of the immediate Phillips family are on diets*’ is misleading because there are more diets available than he realizes.” I doubt that this new form of argument will catch on, given that, *prima facie*, it doesn’t make much sense. But the main point is that Patton’s indebtedness to Schwandt has little to do with either pragmatic realism or my 1995 framework concerning constructivism.

1. Catherine Z. Elgin, “The Merits of Equilibrium,” in *Considered Judgment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

2. D.C. Phillips, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Many Faces of Constructivism," *Educational Researcher* 24, no. 7 (1995): 5–12. Ellett and Ericson also refer to D.C. Phillips, "An Opinionated Account of the Constructivist Landscape," in *Constructivism in Education: Ninety-Ninth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, ed. D.C. Phillips (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 2000), 1–16.
3. Lorin W. Anderson and David R. Krathwohl, *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longman, 2001). See also Benjamin Bloom et al., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook I* (New York: David McKay, 1956).
4. See Michael J. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3d ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2002); and Thomas A. Schwandt, "Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry: Interpretivism, Hermeneutics, and Social Constructivism," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2d ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2000), 189–214.
5. Elgin, *Considered Judgment*; and Catherine Z. Elgin, *Between the Absolute and the Arbitrary* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).