

Constructivist Perspective of Phenomenology*

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Abstract—The article presents a characteristic of phenomenological sociology in its relation to the constructivist paradigm in epistemology and the human sciences. The main attention is paid to A. Schutz's theory and P. Berger and T. Lukman's social constructivism. The influence of M. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy on K. Gergen's social psychology is demonstrated. The thesis is substantiated, according to which social problems are the immanent result of the development of phenomenological philosophy. It also shows that the critique of classical metaphysics undertaken within the framework of phenomenology makes possible a new substantiation of the specifics of social and philosophical knowledge in general.

Keywords—social constructivism; constructionism; phenomenology; intersubjectivity; post-non-classical sociology; ethnomethodology

I. INTRODUCTION

In this article we will proceed from the understanding of “constructivism” as a school in epistemology that took shape in the second half of XX c. and has become a common vector for the development of many disciplines - sociology, neurobiology, psychology. To date, most authors adhere to the classification proposed by K. Gergen, a theorist of social constructionism. According to him, “many works on the sociology of knowledge, history of science, discourse analysis, critical theory, feminist theory ..., communication theory, hermeneutical theory and postmodern political theory and philosophy” can be attributed to constructivism [1]. In this regard, it is not surprising that the well-known sociologist B. Latour notes that today the term “constructivism” is becoming less and less operationalized [2]. (Confusion is also introduced by “deconstruction” - at the level of word usage, a fundamental terminological difference is obvious, while the meaningful concepts are obviously close.)

And yet: at the moment, we can talk about three main versions of constructivist discourse - “social”, “radical” and “constructionism”.

The P. Berger and T. Lukman's sociology of knowledge, as well as J. Piaget's genetic psychology are traditionally referred to social constructivism; its design falls on the 50-

60s of XX century. Radical constructivism was established in the late 70s, its key representatives - E. von Glasersfeld, P. Watzlavik, U. Maturana. Social constructionism is the brainchild of the social psychologist K. Gergen; it is also established in the late 70s of XX century.

The concept of constructivism is widely spread after the publication of the collection “Invented Reality” by E. von Glasersfeld and P. Watzlav k in 1981. The general thrust of this work is a critique of the theory of reflection: our knowledge, according to the authors, is not an image of reality, but truly its “invention”. Glasersfeld defines this position as “epistemological solipsism”. According to Glasersfeld, this means that the theory of constructivism does not claim that there is no “world” - it proceeds from the principle consideration, according to which both the world and other people are models that we ourselves create.

In compliance with this definition, Glasersfeld's allies in the “radical” version of constructivism Chilean biologists F. Valera and U. Maturana developed their own autopoiesis theory. Its essence is: the representation of the surrounding world is always determined by the structure of the cognitive system of a living organism, and not by the objective structures of the surrounding world. Thus, perception is not only a reflection of sensory data: brain constructs it using information processing circuits accumulated as previous experience progresses.

This version of constructivism is opposed to a positivist orientation in science, but the subject of our further consideration is P. Berger and T. Lukman's sociology of knowledge (phenomenological constructivism in a strict sense) [3].

II. SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

The sociology of knowledge program was announced by M. Scheler in the 1920s. The phenomenologists P. Berger and T. Lukman introduce the problematics of everyday life into a very extensive tradition of the sociology of knowledge, challenging “social knowledge” as theoretical and preceded by a body of knowledge of common sense. The topic of “Social Construction of Reality” is therefore quite appropriate to be considered as a kind of inoculation of A. Schutz's phenomenology of the natural setting to the sociology of knowledge traditions.

“Schutz did not create a version of the sociology of knowledge, but in many respects made it possible” [4], the

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authors of the “Treatise” claim. It is the theoretical constructions of A. Schutz, who carried out the synthesis of E. Husserl’s phenomenology of the “life world” and the theory of the social action of M. Weber that became the starting point for the authors of the “Social Construction of Reality”.

Thus, the “reality” for the authors of the “Treatise” appears as the “final areas of meaning”. The coexistence of the latter is problematic, and the world of everyday life, as the prevailing one, should contribute to their “reconciliation”: “Typifications of everyday thinking are integral elements of a concrete historical and socio-cultural life world, within which they are taken for granted ...” [5].

Thus, relying on Schutz, Berger and Lukman proceed from the understanding of perception as typically organized, while the everyday itself is interpreted as taken for granted and unproblematic. At the same time, it is important that the impossibility of proving does not cancel out the obviousness (the latter may be false, but not cease to be obvious).

The analysis of the problem of social interactions also inherits A. Schutz’ argument: from “partner” to “contemporaries”, i.e. from the face-to-face perspective to the increasingly anonymous interaction. The farther “contemporaries” are away from me, the more I type them on the basis of the “social stock of knowledge” available to me. This does not mean “depersonalization”, etc., does not have negative semantic connotations at all, quite the opposite: the typed nature of actions increases the chances for their adequate interpretation, and accordingly, for “understanding” between subjects [6]. In this regard, it should be noted that “understanding” in the theory of Berger and Lukman is not “projection” in another’s psychic life in the sense of V. Dilthey and other representatives of the humanities. According to social phenomenologists, at the level of perception, we do not see the world as consisting of a single and special, quite the opposite — world is based on patterns that we are used to, general patterns of behavior, etc.

The next fundamental point of Berger and Lukman’s theory is the claim for anti-essentialism: neither the “society” nor the “person” are “essential” on the pages of their main work. And if the first chapter reproduces the basic workings of A. Schutz, then the next two, “Society as an objective reality” and “Society as a subjective reality”, are designed to show the dialectic of “exteriorization of the internal” and “interiorization of the external”. Thus, externalization should demonstrate that society is a projection of man, and internalization should demonstrate that man is a product of society [7]. Thus, Berger and Lukman in their work seek to overcome the extremes of E. Durkheim’s “structuralism” and M. Weber’s “actionism”.

As an “objective” society, there is activity and the consolidation of the results of activity (objectification). The “subjective” perspective is represented by internalization - the assimilation of a real social order. At the same time, the process of launching institutionalization, according to Berger and Lukman, is possible with every direct contact. Reproduction of the action makes it a model, because habituation simplifies action. Any institution in this context

will be considered as a “mutual typification of the adopted actions”.

In turn, institutions determine ways of action, normalize interactions. Once consolidated, the institutional order is alienated from man: from ad hoc reality for two individuals, institutions are transformed into an objective order; begin to function out of touch with those who embody the system of action appropriate to the institution.

In an individual, institutional order is embodied as a “role”, assigning certain functions to agents. This is the internalization plan. At the same time, phenomenologists give the priority not to professional, but to primary child socialization - it forms the “basic world”. Socialization, therefore, implies not only the mastery of some kind of special professional knowledge and skills, but also the development of the horizon “for granted” (first of all, with certain behavioral competencies) [8].

Thus, the “knowledge” of the authors of the “Treatise” is interesting not in the perspective of its “objective truth”, but social legitimacy, while the focus is not on specialized forms of knowledge, not on an episteme, but on doxa: everyday life as a phenomenological horizon of meanings and ways of its practical incarnations shared by members of some community.

The key principle of the scientist’s work is the rejection of suppositions (the researcher should analyze the structure of social interactions from the point of view of ordinary agents, without introducing theoretical assumptions), as well as focusing on the “ordinary”, “everyday”, “trivial”. In this regard, it can be argued that if the methodological credo of the classical “cultural sciences” was G. Rickert’s formula “the significance is the greater, the more exceptional the phenomenon is”, then today scientists study the “routine” and “ordinary” more. (Here it is appropriate to note the influence of another outstanding phenomenologist on modern social thought; M. Heidegger asserted that “an ontically trivial is an ontological problem”).

Let’s sum up the intermediate result.

Insisting on the constructive nature of human consciousness – social being exists only in acts of giving it meaning, its interpretation, – phenomenology takes a number of basic assumptions of the sociology of knowledge. At the same time, if for positivist sociology only “science” provided “objective reality”, then within the framework of phenomenology the reverse movement takes place – from logos to myth [9]. The latter will no longer be considered as a “relic” indicating the primitiveness of a particular social structure; on the contrary, one will see the constitutive principle of human existence in it.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that, assuming the historical and linguistic relativity of the lifeworld, the authors of the Treatise still hoped to find a certain fundamental horizon of meanings in it. However, the further development of constructivism will be connected with the demonstration of the fact that there is nothing beyond the “self-evident”, except the insistent desire of individuals to consider it as such [10].

III. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

From this perspective, let us dwell on the theory of K. Gergen, the founder of social constructionism. Formally, he cannot be considered a phenomenological sociologist, but his figure is of direct interest to us for several reasons. Firstly, Gergen is convinced that any psychology is possible only as a “social” one; therefore his theoretical constructions lie in the perspective of the dialectic of subject and society of Berger and Luckmann, partly radicalizing them. Secondly, his theory, in our opinion, directly refers to the earlier works of the French phenomenologist M. Merleau-Ponty. Therefore, we consider it justifiable to speak not only about the categorical, but also about the conceptual connection of social phenomenology and K. Gergen's constructionism.

Criticizing the “radical” version of constructivism in his work, the American scientist largely associates himself with the ideas of the phenomenological sociology of knowledge. The latter, in contrast to the theory of Watzlavik and Glaserfeld, takes into account both perspectives: cognitive design, and dependence on society.

Turning to psychology itself, Gergen outlines in its history two stable ideas about the subject: “romantic” and “modernist”. In the first case, the “deep Self” is the creative center, the source of spirituality and freedom. “Modernism”, in contrast, addresses the ideas of social engineering, offering a version of the “human-machine” as a carrier of transpersonal rational goals.

Gergen himself passes from essentialism to social constructionism: Self is not a substance, but a system of relations that makes any “whatness” possible. In this regard, Gergen talks about the impossibility of “subjective experience”, referring to the phenomenological thought: “To have experience” means to enter into relation or community, being. This kind of reconceptualization is largely based on the phenomenological tradition...” [11]. And indeed, M. Merleau-Ponty way back in the 40-50s [12] created the concept of “deep subjectivity” as the discovery in oneself of a prepersonal “life world”, which alone makes possible the Self as a subject of thinking, acting. That means, the life world in Merleau-Ponty theory is a perspective, fundamentally presupposed to an individual cogito. Before “intentionally taking a position”, “I am already located in the intersubjective world”. There is no Dasein, which would not be simultaneously Mitsein: “to be” is always “to be together” and “together with one another”.

The individual-psychic, as the subject of analysis, thus gives place to the historically relative — the “life-world”. The Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is therefore not a classical philosophy of consciousness. The transcendental Self is not self-identical (the Cartesian interpretation) - it always acts as an empirical Self; the subject of Merleau-Ponty is different from Kant's subject: it is not a condition of knowledge, but a unity of concrete experiences.

Rejecting the reality of the psychic, Gergen puts social relations in the place of the “soul” as the main subject and at the same time the explanatory principle of human actions: “Constructionists explain everything that psychology reduces

to mental principles with micro-social processes” [13]. Like the problem we analyzed earlier, Berger and Lukman's “a person in society - a society in a person”, Gergen in his conclusions also proceeds from the fact that the perspective of the subject is always the perspective of society. It can be argued that the constructionist Gergen is united with the phenomenologists in rejecting the mentalist theory of activity: not individual motivation is primary, but conventions admitted by society, within which the subjective experience of the acting only gives meaning. This means that the starting point is not acting individuals as such, but always their involvement in the situation: acting as a contextual “here and now”. In this regard, today the concept of “communicative rationality” is increasingly used - as opposed to the “rational communication” of the classical theory of social action (first of all, M. Weber).

If the “modernist” sociology presupposed a strict legality of society development and, in this sense, a single line of development of the human Self, and the “romantic” tradition, on the contrary, appealed to the determination of society by man, then constructionism seeks theoretical resources for overcoming the subject-object opposition: “One of the most promising alternatives, appearing on the cultural horizon, is an appeal to the relative, the transition from the concepts of Self and the group to such concepts as interdependence, cooperative construction of sense, mutually interacting units and system process” [14].

These arguments are undoubtedly synonymous with the earlier works of Merleau-Ponty. Thus, the “life world” in his theory reflects the involvement of individuals in a single space of consistency, but the consistency itself is not revealed thanks to a common essence shared by all. “Co-being” is not a collective result of “real”, but it is not distributed among them like a common substance. “We are other” is located between “all of us” of abstract universalism and the “Self” of extreme individualism. “Community” will be the space of “Us other” - “commonality” is not the relation of the same to the same, but the irremovability of the other.

The question of being and the meaning of being in the works of Merleau-Ponty becomes a question of co-being and being-together. Justifying ontology as a “social”, the French philosopher makes possible a new type of existential analytics (which K. Gergen will perceive in many respects). Anthropology here is, as always, possible as social, but not in the sense of an unpretentious “public animal”. Social is not something that would represent our ancestral essence [15]. The question is how to justify the interdependence of people's lives, if we are not satisfied with its explanation based on the mechanism of organizing collective survival; how to define that existential modality of the social, which is possible only as a “co-manifestation”.

The analysis, we believe, allows us to speak about the really close proximity of social constructivism and constructionism, as well as the continuity of the theory of K. Gergen in relation to the phenomenological psychology of M. Merleau-Ponty.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let us note the following. M. Merleau-Ponty, A. Schutz, P. Berger proceed from the transcendental idealism of early Husserl to substantiate subjectivity as already rooted in the life-world. The “inner” ceases to refer to “private life”, and henceforth it is understood as an intersubjectivity, acting as a necessary element of the individual consciousness. Thus, the subjective-objective paradigm of classical social science in the framework of phenomenological sociology is replaced by the interpretation of the social as a sphere of universal praxis - “coexistence, which is neither an accomplished fact, nor an object of contemplation” [16]. The social is not an object here, but “my life situation”. In this sense, it is not some kind of public space, but the actualization of “being-together”.

Thus, we can say that social issues are not introduced into the phenomenological philosophy “from the outside” – it is the result of the immanent development of this tradition. In this regard, we argue that the interpretation of phenomenology as a “sociological solipsism” is untenable. The principle of intentionality implicitly contains criticism of the rigid separation of the subject and object of knowledge. Thus, the “world” in phenomenology is fundamentally not the otherness of consciousness (as in the philosophy of J. Berkeley): as a result of the reduction, it is not self who remains, but the world of intentional objects. That is, experience is the unity of the object and content of the act of perception. Therefore, the original setting of phenomenology to “abstain from ontological” – as a philosophical prerequisite for epistemological constructivism – has never been a complete break with being. This duality of phenomenological philosophy has a powerful heuristic potential.

In the light of the above, let us note the fact that at present many experts in epistemology and the theory of knowledge are inclined towards such a “double perspective”. Thus, a number of domestic and foreign theorists of science are increasingly using the concepts of “constructive realism”, “realistic perspectivism”. And the thesis of the existence of a certain entirely objective position is rejected; in turn, any “perspective” presupposes that, the prospect of which it is: “Realism of points of view, and not objective or metaphysical realism” [17].

Finally, the criticism of classical metaphysics undertaken within the framework of the phenomenological philosophy makes possible a new substantiation of the specifics of socio-philosophical knowledge. The phrase “social philosophy” in this case will mean not so much the philosophy “about social”, as the philosophy “from social”: not a philosophy that along with “epistemological”, “ontological” and other issues develops “social” issues, but such a theory, which is developed in the context of the “sociologization” of metaphysics itself.

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