

Ethical realism before social constructionism

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the idea that there is a fundamental ethical aspect that precedes social constructionism. I suggest that within social constructionism we can identify a development from seeing knowledge as socially constructed (*epistemological* social constructionism) to seeing not only knowledge, but also corporeal ways of being as socially constructed (*ontological* social constructionism). As a next step, I propose incorporating what I refer to as ethical realism in social constructionist perspectives. In the encounter with the other human being, I argue that there is a real ethical impulse that precedes social constructionism and puts it in motion. This impulse is real in the sense that it is neither constructed within, nor is it dependent upon, any particular social–cultural–historical context. In this paper I consider the ethical aspects of human encounters that allow for a constructionist epistemology and ontology to emerge in the first place. I make use of ideas from Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Rancière and consider how these thinkers are used in the work of Gert Biesta. The ideas are discussed in relation to findings from a previous study by the author and his colleagues exploring the experiences of adolescents taking part in mental health services.

Keywords

ethical realism, Levinas, mental health, Rancière, social constructionism

Love . . . is a relationship with what forever slips away. (Levinas, 1982/1985, s. 76)

There are, perhaps, few who would dispute that our encounters with others are at the heart of our lives. We seem to be dependent on meeting people in our daily lives, and it seems important that these meetings are vitalizing so that we do not give up on social interaction and withdraw from social life. In the context of mental health practice, approaches such as family therapy and dialogical practices (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Rober, 2017; Seikkula, 2011) have put the encounters and conversations with

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clients and their networks at the core of the practice, drawing in particular on the theoretical framework of social constructionism (e.g., Gergen, 2011; Shotter, 2008).

In a previous study, my colleagues and I investigated the dynamics of change based on interviews with eight adolescents aged 16 to 18 years and their families who were getting help from mental health services through network meetings (Bøe, 2016; Bøe et al., 2014, 2015). The services explored facilitated network meetings in line with the principles of the open dialogue approach, as developed by Seikkula and colleagues (Seikkula et al., 2006; Seikkula & Arnkil, 2013) and included people in the adolescents' private networks. The study suggested that the conversations facilitated change through different aspects of the dialogue that were "at work" simultaneously. More specifically, we identified the following: (a) a hermeneutic aspect (the way dialogue led to new understanding); (b) an expressive aspect (the way dialogue made new ways of being alive and vital with others possible); and (c) an ethical aspect (the way the interlocutors were attentive, responded with care, and invited each other into the dialogue).

"Isabelle,"¹ a 17-year-old girl interviewed in the study presented above, described her experience with the network meetings and spoke appreciatively about the therapists in this way (Bøe, 2016):²

No one can fully understand another person. But the way they [the therapists] try, that is the only thing they can do. . . . I see that they *really try* to understand; in that way, they show me they care. . . . And they make me speak. . . . With them, nothing I say is stupid. (Isabelle, 17)

It seemed that Isabelle sensed an attention that was out of interest in her and care for her. This ethically laden attention seems to be what made her speak and engage in the conversation. In this article, I take a closer look at this ethical aspect of dialogue and suggest that it precedes the expressive and hermeneutic aspects of dialogue and that it is necessary for getting them started. The explorative angle of the paper is theoretical reflections, with illustrations and reflections related to mental health practice taken from the particular empirical study introduced above.

Ethics and ethical realism

The term "ethics" is often used to mean a systematic investigation into (a) values and norms that may guide or behaviors, (b) the (cultural–historical) origins of and conditions for these values and norms, and (c) possible procedures to apply these values and norms in specific situations, situations often characterized as ethical dilemmas (Aadland, 1993; Oxford English Dictionary, 2020; Riffin & Lack, 2018). In this sense, ethics is a theoretical concern, a branch of science and philosophy, and a historically–culturally dependent matter.

Ethics can also refer not to the theoretical level but to an aspect of human existence that we inevitably face in our lives and that we inevitably have to relate to regardless of any scientific or philosophical questions. It is attention to such an ethics—ethics as an inherent dimension of human existence in the lives we are living with others—that I will try to say something about in this paper.

I introduce an idea that I refer to as *ethical realism*: the idea that ethics is not something we add to our lives or that we construct through social–cultural reflections and

interpretations. Ethics, in the sense of a call or obligation to do good, is an existing imperative inherent when we face reality and other human beings, prior to constructions and interpretations of reality and of other human beings (Finlay, 2007; Nortvedt, 2003, 2012). There are many versions of ethical (or moral) realism (see Finlay, 2007). The kind that I propose resembles what Nortvedt (2012) calls a “perceptual moral realism” (p. 296). He points to a “value ladenness” in what we perceive and states that values are something we discover rather than invent. Accordingly, Nortvedt speaks of a “moral pull” (p. 297), a kind of force that pulls us when distinct “moral realities” are revealed. He argues that pain, for example, has a moral reality that is not totally dependent on an evaluative endorsement. The “moral pull” seems to exist independent of interpretations and evaluations. When we see someone in pain, it affects us and makes us feel an obligation to do something to help. Ethical realism suggests that this obligation comes to us directly from the pain we see, unmediated by interpretations. Nortvedt and Nordhaug (2008) describe this view as the phenomenological ethics of proximity. Nortvedt draws from the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, which, according to Nortvedt, is an ethics “irreducible to comprehension . . . a non-cognitive understanding of moral responsibility in which passivity of consciousness, . . . affect and sensibility plays a significant role” (Nortvedt & Nordhaug, 2008, p. 157). Thus, such a phenomenological ethical realism is quite different from the theoretical (ethical) realism claiming that values and norms can be formulated and theoretically available while still corresponding to “real” and “true” values. Nortvedt points out that Levinas, along with ethical thinkers such as Knud Løgstrup, Hans Jonas, and Zygmunt Bauman, “endorse[s] a version of realism in ethics, in which a fundamental moral reality can be accessible by human experience and perception” (Nortvedt & Nordhaug, 2008, p. 157).

In this article, ethical realism is the idea that the origin of ethics is real and that it preexists our interpretations and evaluations of what we confront, and thus, in a sense, precedes social, cultural, and historical constructs of meaning.

An ethical spark lost from sight in social constructionism?

Social constructionism refers to a wide and complex range of positions on the relationship between constructions and reality (Pocock, 2015), and any general account of it risks failing to capture the variety of nuanced perspectives. Still, I suggest that we can find in social constructionism (e.g., Gergen, 2011; Shotter, 2011) the idea that we are formed within relations, contexts, and dialogues, all of which can be historical and cultural, and that in this way, we and our world are socially constructed. Our views of the world and our forms of living are constructed by our participation in this social interplay that include both epistemological aspects (it is where we get our ideas/knowledge) and ontological aspects (it is where our ways of being are formed). Are we not then enclosed in a kind of sameness, in what is shared, in what is common to us, and in what is mediated by cultural and historical constructs? I suggest that there might be a uniqueness and a singularity of the subject, an irreplaceability vis-à-vis the other that is not a matter of social-cultural-historical constructs. Many accounts of social constructionism and dialogical perspectives seem to have lost sight of this fundamental “spark” that precedes social-cultural-historical constructs. There is a primary “moral pull” that in a second turn makes dialogue and social

construction come about. It is an ethics that precedes dialogue or, as Levinas (1982/1985) puts it, “Dia-conie avant tout dialogue” (Dia-cony before all dialogue) (Levinas, 1982, p. 103). It is through this dialogue that is pulled off by the ethical reality of the other that our movements, expressions, and forms (ontology), and our ideas, knowledge, and representations of reality (epistemology) are socially constructed.

I explore the idea of an ethical realism that precedes social constructionism in three steps. First, I propose that there is a philosophical line in Western thought, a development from the knowing autonomous individual to the sensible heteronomous subject. Second, I present ideas in social constructionism, in particular the ontological social constructionism that Shotter suggests is a needed radicalization of current epistemological versions of social constructionism. Finally, I introduce the idea of an ethical social constructionism that perhaps is not constructionism at all but rather a kind of ethical realism that social constructionism (both epistemological and ontological) may be missing out on. I suggest that this ethical realism should be “placed” at the heart of the dynamics of social constructionism and be considered its origin. It is the ethical reality and irreplaceability of the other that gets social constructionism started.

Step I: From the knowing autonomous individual to the sensible heteronomous subject

Western philosophical tradition has focused on knowledge (Aarnes, 1993). This emphasis on knowledge, and with it *thinking*, may be seen as a heritage from Descartes and his famous; “I think therefore I am.” This privileging of knowledge, thinking, and reason, built on the belief that language can express the truth of reality, may be referred to as *logocentrism* (Jung, 1998).

Descartes’ starting point also gave us the “I am,” the ego, a key position in philosophy “I think therefore I am.” This priority of the ego may be referred to as *egocentrism* (Jung, 1998). We also recognize this in the philosophy and ethics of Immanuel Kant: moral has to do with the choices of an *autonomous* and *rational* human being. In a sense, ethics in Kant is reduced to a question of the individual’s self-formation and respect for the other and their own self-formation (Løgstrup, 1971/1991, p. 33).

Logocentrism, the belief in knowledge, and egocentrism, the belief in the primacy of the individual/ego, can be seen as key ingredients in the modern paradigm and the project of enlightenment: *individuals* should be liberated through *knowledge*. It is precisely these beliefs that are questioned in the postmodern paradigm and in social constructionism. Language (and knowledge) cannot mirror reality directly (logocentrism), and the ego is not a primary, sovereign, or pre-given entity (egocentrism).

A crucial turn in philosophy opposing this priority of knowledge and of the ego seen as a distinct and sovereign entity is found in Heidegger (Levinas, 1993). He took his point of departure in the human feeling of alienation—the feeling of being a stranger in the world. He rejected the idea that this alienation could be overcome by a belief in a human soul that belonged to, and could return to, some metaphysical domain: God, the Divine. Heidegger also rejected the way Western thought seemed to be confusing *being* with *knowledge*. Taking knowledge and thinking for being was inherited from Descartes

as articulated in “I think therefore I am.” *To be* was seen as equivalent to thinking, consciousness, and contemplation; in this way, knowledge became the essence of being human. This knowledge-centered (logos-centric) philosophy became an epistemological worldview that considered “what is ultimate and fundamental in our relation to the world is our knowledge of it” (Biesta, 2004a, p. 309). This human search for itself in *knowledge* or *consciousness* led humans into what Heidegger called “forgetfulness of being” (Critchley & Bernasconi, 2002, p. 19). As an alternative way out of this alienation, Heidegger offered a philosophy of how humans belong fundamentally in their modes of being, in their “*being-in-the-world*,” in their “*dasein*.” Heidegger called his philosophy a fundamental ontology because it explored human existence as modes of *being* (not modes of knowing).

Levinas had great respect for Heidegger’s fundamental ontology and, especially, for the way Heidegger removed knowledge from its throne and with it consciousness and thinking as the essential and primary nature of human beings. At the same time, Levinas’ philosophy can be read as being in opposition to Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. Levinas’ philosophy is a fundamental *ethics*, not an ontology. His ethics reinserts a metaphysical or transcendent dimension that he thought was missing in Heidegger (Aarnes, 1993). This metaphysical dimension is not found in God or religion, nor in knowledge or consciousness. It is found with attention in a totally different direction, namely the *Other human being*. The whole of his ethics can be expressed in the simple phrase “after you!” (Goodman et al., 2010; Levinas, 1993). The problem is not “forgetfulness of being” as Heidegger proposed but rather “forgetfulness of the Other” (Critchley & Bernasconi, 2002, p. 19). In this way, Levinas draws our attention to what is exposed when the Other enters the scene. More precisely, Levinas points to the human face. What is it about the human face that, according to Levinas, makes it the origin of both ethics and the human subject? Levinas describes the human face, and with it the appearance of the Other, as follows:

Within the world of appearances, [the face] cries out the shame of its hidden mystery, it cries out *with a grieving heart*; human nakedness calls upon me—it calls upon the *I* that I am—. . . from its weakness, without protection. . . . But it also calls upon me from a strange authority—imperative . . . the verb in the human face . . . stripped of the countenance it gives itself—or puts up with—under the proper names, titles, and genera of the world. . . . [The face is] the language of the inaudible, the language of the unheard of, the language of the non-said. (Levinas, 1998, pp. 198–199)

The actual face of the Other appears “stripped of the countenance it gives itself—. . . under the proper names, titles, and genera of the world.” This means that the appearance of the face is an event prior to knowledge (names and titles of the world) and prior to any interpretative, epistemological construction, and in this sense the face is *real*. The call exposed in the face is also an event prior to personal expressivity, expressivity in the sense that the face conveys a person’s feelings, attitudes, and meanings related to something (stripped of the countenance it gives itself). Still, prior to knowledge, interpretation, and even personal expression, “it calls upon me” and demands a response. Interestingly—and this is at the core of Levinas’ philosophy—he does not place the face

in a sphere *prior to* language. No, he goes beyond common ideas of what language is, saying that “the face is the language of the inaudible, . . . unheard . . . [and of] the non-said” (Levinas, 1998, p. 199).

In line with this, we could say that the social and what is socially constructed have origins in this preepistemological and preontological event. This ethical event could be characterized as a kind of *ethical realism* that precedes and is necessary for ontological and epistemological constructionism to get started. It is in our response to this primordial call that we arrive at the encounter as an I and then, in turn, become thoughtful and take action within the fabric of what is socio–culturally–historically constructed, because responsibility demands it. Our response needs a form.

It is only after this primordial call that we arrive as an I. Levinas’ ideas imply that the starting point of human existence is neither consciousness, nor the intentional, acting individual. Ethical sensibility becomes the origin of the subject, and existence becomes responsibility. This responsibility does not originate in the free, autonomous, and rational human subject as Kantian ethics suggests. The subject, then, is no longer seen as autonomous (acting according to its own laws) and knowing but as heteronomous (acting according to the laws of the Other) and sensible.

Step 2: From epistemological to ontological social constructionism

John Shotter (2011, 2016) is a significant contributor to the development of social constructionism. However, it is crucial to point out that over the course of his writing Shotter has opposed the way social constructionism seemed bound up in an *epistemic domain*, in language seen as a re–presentation of reality. By epistemic domain he means, to put it rather simply, that reality is socially constructed in the sense that the way to think about or picture the world is socially constructed through communication (Shotter, 2003, 2010). Shotter (2010) says that such an epistemic social constructionism is “nowhere near radical enough” (p. 20; see also Shotter, 2003). He goes on to argue for an ontological social constructionism (Shotter, 2009, 2010) that has to do with the “living expressive–responsiveness of our moving bodies”—rather than “language re–presentational realities”—and where “forms of life” (not pictures of the world) emerge within the encounters of bodies (Shotter, 2010, p. 21). Social constructionism must move beyond a view of language as having only a re–presentative function. Our corporeal, physical way of existing must be included in language, as linguistic performance. His point is that language itself is ontological, language *is*, it *is* bodies, voices, and faces in expressive, physical interplay (Shotter, 2009, 2012).

Shotter (in an interview in Lock & Strong, 2010) points out that current versions of social constructionism remain lopsided in viewing language as purely *referential–representational* in its function. Whereas Shotter himself offers a view of language as *relational–responsive*. Language does not only construct our (external) picture of the world, but “interpersonal language . . . works to ‘construct’ or ‘constitute’ the style of our social relations, the grammars of our forms of life” (Lock & Strong, p. 329).

Throughout his work, Shotter has been interested in the question of how realism can and should be brought into dialogue with social constructionism (e.g., Shotter, 1992). He

suggests that the ontological social constructionism he proposes can be seen as a kind of realism, either expressive realism (Shotter, 2005) or agential realism³ (Shotter, 2014). What we *do* when we speak and communicate is real before it (also) re-presents the real. Similarly, Bertau (2014) points to how language is both *presentation* (ontology) and *re-presentation* (epistemology); it is “representation by presentation” (p. 448). Language, she writes, is “vivid materiality.”

Adolescents’ experiences—Meaning making and vitalizing dialogues

In the study exploring the dynamics of change introduced in the opening section (Bøe et al., 2014, 2015) we looked at how the adolescents interviewed described their experiences with the network meetings. The study suggests that the dialogues in the network meetings facilitated by the mental health service seemed to affect the adolescents through what we identified as the *epistemic (hermeneutic) aspect* and the *ontological (expressive/vital) aspect* (Bøe et al., 2015). The adolescents described how the dialogues were helpful because they provided new understanding of their situations and of future possibilities. Such experiences seemed to be about an epistemic aspect, or what we suggested was a hermeneutic domain, or even hermeneutic social constructionism. Furthermore, the adolescents talked just as much about what it was like to be there in the meeting, how they dared to speak, and about how speaking might shift from being something difficult to something that made them feel good, and about how they were responded to in positive ways. In the meetings they seemed to have experienced an ontological aspect of the dialogue in which the dialogue offered them new ways of being (or becoming). This is in line with the ontological aspect of social constructionism.

Adolescents’ experiences—An ethical spark

However, they also described an aspect of the conversations that concerned the way the practitioners seemed to care about them and gave them attention that invited them into dialogue. We suggested that this concerned an ethical aspect. It seemed that if this attention and care aspect was not present, the dialogues in the network meetings were not helpful, or the dialogues never actually began.

As such, this ethical aspect seemed to be a necessary precondition for helpful dialogues to take place during network meetings. This was also in and of itself a greatly significant aspect, perhaps even the most important aspect, of receiving help.

In our interview with 17-year-old “Philip,” he told us how his difficulties began. At the heart of Philip’s story are his experiences at school (Bøe et al., 2014):

If I walked over to some friends, they would walk away. I felt like, “Why would they do such a thing? Why would they do such a thing?” [in a raised voice and tone of despair]. . . . In some way they didn’t want me to be with them. . . . It hurt so much it was hardly bearable. . . . It was like being beaten to death. (Phillip, 17; p. 478)

What he described could be seen as an “ethical breakdown” (Bøe et al., 2013, p. 26), an ethical breakdown that occurred when his “friends” turned their backs on him, and he

was deprived of a potential source of both expressiveness and vitality and also understanding and meaning.

Both Philip and his sister found the network meetings helpful, and his sister stated that the conversations “seem to have left traces in him” (Bøe et al., 2013):

I absolutely think there should be more meetings. He has to talk about things; he must put things into words. . . , because through that he can find himself a bit. In those meetings, he spoke like I have never heard him speak before. (Mona, Philip’s sister; p. 27)

This “finding oneself through speaking” cannot be reduced to a hermeneutic/epistemological matter, to the question of knowing oneself, or understanding one’s own situation. If difficulties are about ethical breakdowns and hence deprivation of a dialogical space for vitality and meaning making, then help could be about inviting encounters that may (re)introduce the ethical sources essential to living: ethically, as we are welcomed by others; vitally, as we are offered opportunity to express ourselves; hermeneutically, as we may find words for what we did not have words for before.

I will now examine these ethical aspects that seems to be at the heart of the adolescents’ experiences and that even appear to precede helpful dialogue and be a precondition for its occurrence.

Step 3: Ethical realism triggers social constructionism

As pointed out above, Shotter develops his line of thought in opposition to an epistemological social constructionism that he thinks is not radical enough and suggests a more radical ontological social constructionism. It is at this stage that I am tempted to play with the idea that this ontological social constructionism is also perhaps not radical enough. Perhaps I could propose a kind of ethical social constructionism that includes ethical realism. Or put in a normative way: Social constructionism must begin with ethical realism.

Here, I am inspired by the line of development we saw in the history of philosophy: from the priority of *knowledge—episteme*—found in Descartes and Kant to the priority of *being—ontology*—found in Heidegger to the priority of the *Other—ethics*—found in Levinas. Correspondingly, perhaps we (and in a sense Shotter invites us to do this) can speak of turns in social constructionist perspectives: from epistemic or linguistic versions of social constructionism to the more radical ontological social constructionism and then to an even more radical ethical social constructionism, which I propose with some hesitation. I hesitate to call it constructionism because perhaps this is not at all about anything that is constructed. On the contrary, it is there prior to any construction, it is about that which happens prior to, or in the rupture of, what is constructed; this is what makes it possible for the Other to come into view as unique and singular. The encounter between a unique “you” and a unique “I.” This ethical social constructionism is perhaps best thought of not as a form of constructionism but as an *ethical realism*. It is real and it is ethical, and it shatters the order of things and imposes a de-identification (epistemological interruption) and de-formation (ontological interruption). The Other is the one who never fits in, and I am the response to this stranger, the one “who forever

slips away” (Levinas, 1982/1985, p. 76). In Levinas, the question of the subject coincides in a way with the question of ethics. As Levinas (1982/1985) puts it: “the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility” (p. 95).

What can it mean that “something” is not of an ontological nature, that it is outside of being, outside of what *is*? Butler (2005) explains Levinas’ idea of the subject that emerges in this “preontological” sphere and says that it is preontological in the following sense:

The phenomenal world of persons and things becomes available only after the self has been formed as an effect of a primary impingement. We cannot ask after “where” or “when” of this primary scene, since it precedes and even conditions the spatio-temporal coordinates that circumscribe the ontological domain. To describe this scene is to take leave of the descriptive field in which a “self” is formed and bounded in one place and time. . . . Levinas cautions us against thinking we can find a narrative form for this pre-ontological beginning. (pp. 86–87)

Butler suggests that the ontological domain needs “spatio-temporal coordinates” and that the ethical event is not found within these co-ordinates but happens before the self is formed within such a world of “where” and “when.” This ethical event, or, in Butler’s words, “primary impingement” is real in that it happens outside of and prior to any cultural, hermeneutic, narrative constructions. However, this ethical event starting from the reality and alterity of the other puts the dynamics of epistemology and ontology in motion because it is needed to respond to the ethical demand. However, there is a danger that this ethically necessary “preontological beginning” may be lost from sight. Levinas (1993) calls this a “forgetfulness of the Other.”

By responding to another human being, the “I” arrives and enters the social–cultural–historical fabric. However, it is a paradoxical arrival. The Other, who is “extra-ordinary” (outside any order), also comes towards me and “[makes] an entry” (Levinas, 1996, p. 53), and through cultural gestures is integrated into the world. The Other enters the world by taking on a form by means of “cultural ornaments,” and this entry of the Other will also “disturb and jostle” the culture that is being entered (p. 53). The entry to culture in which strangeness and singularity become a subject is “a detachment from [the subject’s] form in the midst of the production of its form” (p. 53).

The Other that comes towards me is someone real, and the realness is ethical in the sense that I am called to respond. The arrival of the Other pulls me into the dynamics of social constructionism while at the same time also interrupts the very same dynamics. The reality of the Other prevents a collapse into commonality and community.

“Singed out”—Uniqueness as irreplaceability

Biesta (2014), drawing on Levinas, makes a seemingly important and helpful distinction between uniqueness as difference and uniqueness as irreplaceability. A common understanding of uniqueness is that it is about difference. This understanding involves how the characteristics, qualities, skills, and identity of one person differ from those of other persons. This understanding of uniqueness is defined by comparison with others in an order of identifiable differences. Biesta proposes another understanding of uniqueness: uniqueness as irreplaceability. Attention then shifts from questions about what qualities,

identities, characteristics, and so on, make each of us unique to searches for “situations *in which it matters* that I am unique” (Biesta, 2014, p. 21), situations where I cannot be replaced by someone else.

Biesta (2004b) points to Zygmunt Bauman, who claims that only an individual can be responsible, saying that in the moral relationship “I and the Other are not exchangeable, and thus cannot be ‘added up’ to form a plural ‘we’. . . . [To be] in morally charged situations, means being on our own” (p. 244).

As responsible for the Other, I am on my own. Bauman discovered in Levinas the idea of a moral impulse that he saw as relevant to sociology. According to Hirst (2014), Levinas’ moral impulse is regarded as “sociologically suspect” (p. 184) because it is found outside distinct social and historical formations:

Bauman moves away from affirming the dynamics of human history . . . towards a sociologically suspect individual moral impulse which exists outside distinct social and historical formations. (Hirst, 2014, p. 184)

This “moral impulse” is probably also suspect when seen from a social constructionist point of view and therefore may be missed or forgotten.

This moral impulse is singular, unique, and irreplaceable. This uniqueness cannot be reduced to a matter of taking on a form within a historical–cultural domain. Rather, one could say that the uniqueness is about deformation (Cohen, 2003) in the sense that the subject is an event that cuts through the forms of culture (hermeneutical and ontological) and even through the range of bio-neuro-social-cultural levels (Biesta, 2020). Biesta goes on to say that these situations in which it matters that I am unique are situations when someone *calls me*, someone, as he says, “singles me out.” This is not about any fact that “I *am* unique,” nor about a quality of my being or some competence I possess (which we could call ontology); it is about my uniqueness that *matters* to someone (which is ethics). Subjectivity then becomes an ethical event in which I am *singularized* by someone else.

The subject appearing in the split of the sensible

McQuillan (2011) points out that in Western philosophy, in particular French philosophy, there has been a shift from an interest in theory and intellectual questions to an interest in ethics and aesthetics, a “turn to the sensible” (p. 20). Levinas, according to McQuillan, is important to this turn and also Jacques Rancière with his political aesthetics. Biesta (2010b) speaks of the subject not as an entity or essence but, inspired by Levinas, as an event. However, inspired by Rancière, he also uses the concept of *subjectification*. Rancière’s philosophy can be seen as a political theory that is at the same time phenomenological, a philosophy about democracy in terms of the conditions of perception and sensibility within perceptual fields (Panagia, 2012, p. 99). A key point is that the way we sense and perceive the world and others in the world is determined by a “perceptual field,” a “perceptible organization of the community” (Rancière as cited in Biesta, 2011, p. 150). Rancière (2004) calls this perceptual field *the distribution of the sensible*, referring to “the implicit law governing the sensible that parcels out places and forms of

participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed" (p. 89). The distribution of the sensible is about a system of co-ordinates defining modes of being, doing, and making. This establishes a "sensible world" with certain borders between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, and the sayable and the unsayable.

For Rancière, subjectification is a political/democratic event. It is a process in and through which political subjects are constituted "through the actions of a body . . . not previously identified within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience" (Rancière quoted in Biesta, 2011, p. 150). The established perceptual field allows the appearance of some subjects and excludes the appearance of others. Subjectification is about the event in which a subject appears, as for the first time, through a split in the established perceptual field. Hence, Rancière offers a political theory that also has been referred to as an "*ethics of appearance* [emphasis added]" (Panagia, 2012, p. 103).⁴ The subject is understood as an event of appearance in which conventional forms of looking, of hearing, and of perceiving are disrupted by what was previously insensible. According to Rancière, subjectification is different from identification. Identification is about taking on a place and role within an order of identities and roles. Subjectification, on the other hand, is about a "rupture in the order of things," a rupture that makes the appearance of subjectivity possible, or as Biesta (2010a) writes, "a rupture that *is* the appearance of subjectivity" (p. 46). Subjectification happens as "dis-identification" (Biesta, 2010a).

On the one hand one might suggest that social constructionism operates *within* the confines of this "distribution of the sensible," both in an epistemological sense—the way we think and what is counted as knowledge is socially constructed within this "distribution of the sensible"—and in an ontological sense—the ways of being, doing, and making are formed within the limits of this order given by the "distribution of the sensible." On the other hand, one might also suggest the opposite, that social constructionism critically points out how various views and aspects of knowledge about the world that may be taken for the truth of the world are social-cultural-historical constructions? Hence, they also show that *other* constructions are possible and even desired. However, Rancière does not seem to suggest that new constructions, or a new "distribution of the sensible," should be constructed. Rather his emancipative point is that ethics, democracy, and the becoming of a subject happen as a result of a split in the constructions. This splitting results in the appearance of a subject that was not previously sensible.

Rancière—and Biesta—in this way gives attention not to what is present but to what is, so to speak, absent. The locus of attention is in a sense directed towards precisely that which is not visible or not audible within the natural order. "Political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogenous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part" (Rancière as cited in Biesta, 2010b, p. 121).

A common notion in postmodern perspectives—and in social constructionism—is that things derive their meaning from context. Rancière may have viewed this somewhat differently. In Rancière, context becomes what must be divided, shattered, and interrupted for the arrival of the subject to occur.

Adolescents' experiences—Ethical invitation before meaning making and vitalizing dialogues

Clearly, it is difficult—and perhaps even in principle impossible—to do research that identifies this ethical event in adolescents' experiences. The appearance of the Other, and my response to this Other in which I arrive as a subject, is an event that Butler suggests precedes any spatio-temporal co-ordinates, any “where” and “when.” Qualitative research operates in the domain of what is identifiable and what can be articulated. Hence, there may be a fundamental fallacy in qualitative research that disregards aspects of life that fall outside of the identifiable (Bøe et al., 2019).

However, we suggest that we saw traces of such ethical aspects in what the adolescents reported in the studies I have referred to throughout this article (Bøe et al., 2013, 2014, 2015). There seemed to be something of significance for them that did not seem to be about understanding or knowledge, neither the therapists' nor their own. Furthermore, there appeared to be something in the domain of the ethical that was of fundamental significance and needed to “be in place” for the adolescents to “enter” and engage in the conversations in the network meetings. It seemed that the adolescents sensed this ethical impulse in the way the therapist responded to them and gave them attention in a caring way. This (ethical) attention, perhaps before any intention, seemed to be what invited them into the dialogues that in turn were both vitalizing and gave opportunity for meaning-making (Bøe et al., 2015).

Seventeen-year-old “John,” told us about the conversations he attended together with his father and what they meant to him (Bertelsen & Bøe, 2016; Bøe et al., 2015). He said that the therapist organizing the meetings was “the best psychologist in the world.” When we asked what it was about the therapist that made him so good, the boy seemed to have problems identifying any specific qualities in the therapist's speech or actions. Surprisingly, he described the therapist as quirky (Bertelsen & Bøe, 2016):

Interviewer: It's quite fun to hear about the conversations you [he and his father] have with him [the therapist].

John: Yes. It's something about him. He is quirky [smiles broadly, twisting his body].

Interviewer: He is quirky? Was that what you said?

John: Yes. He is quirky. He is . . . he is like . . . Sometimes I have said that he is. He is like . . . he is quirky actually [laughs loudly]. It's hard to say how he is. . . . He is weird. He is a real . . . No, everyone should have one like him. I would recommend him to anyone. So he is . . . he must be . . . No, he is simply the world's greatest psychologist. He is just insanely good.

Interviewer: What is it that makes him the world's greatest psychologist, then?

John: Well, it is . . . the way he . . . just to look . . . just to look at him, you know [smiles and twists his body]. Just to see him, like, the way he looks. . . . He is . . . he is quirky, simply. . . . Unfortunately, I cannot describe him with any other words. than that. Uh . . . [smiles, shakes his head]. (p. 369)

We cannot in any way be certain of what this is about. However, it hints at something of significance that is *not* in the domain of understanding and knowledge (epistemological). Rather, it seems to be in the domain of expressiveness and vitality (ontology), and perhaps also, in line with the ethical realism I attempt to highlight in this paper. What John tried to identify is perhaps an (unidentifiable) ethical impulse that occurred and that brought both John and the therapist to life as subjects through ethical attentiveness and responsibility.

Concluding remarks

I will return to the idea from Biesta that it is when I am “singled out” by someone that my subjectivity comes into play and matters and that in that moment it is my uniqueness as one who is irreplaceable that matters: I and no one else must be there for the Other. One reason I am so attracted to that idea is because it takes the whole question of ethics “out” to a completely other sphere; the whole question of “what is ethics?” collapses. It is inverted, inverted to what you cannot prepare for and is out of your control. Still, if ethics is about irreplaceability and being singled out, then, well, *you just have to be there*.

The event of being singled out as irreplaceable reminds me of a poem I found in a textbook that my son Julian had at school some years ago that touched me. I have not been able to find the poem. It was a very simple poem, and it went something like this. . .

It’s nice to have a house / It’s nice to have a family / It’s nice to have a bike / It’s
nice to have a friend / Ahh, here he comes. . .

I think what touched me was the surprise that the friend was suddenly there! The boy is interrupted in the middle of the poem. The arrival of his friend, in flesh and blood, interrupts the poem and interrupts his reading. His friend is real. The boy stops, leaves the poem, and goes with his friend.

If ethical realism and the event of “being singled out” is something you cannot prepare for, then perhaps I should refrain from any definitive conclusion and from pointing out implications for practice. Nevertheless a few words: in this article I suggest that attention to an ethical reality of the unknown that comes prior to and from outside of constructions is forgotten in accounts of social constructionism and dialogical approaches. I also suggest that it is this ethical spark that puts social–cultural–historical dynamics in motion. Social constructionism and dialogical approaches must begin in the ethical reality of the Other.

For mental health practice as well as other professional practices, this may imply that in order to “open up” possibilities for living and meaning making by those involved, inviting attentiveness towards the Other may be crucial. Perhaps the main challenge for mental health practitioners and other professionals is to respond to aspects of the encounter that lie in the unknowable uniqueness of the Other. This is an ethical kind of sensitivity; it is a readiness to care for the Other through one’s responses to the Other. The starting point for eliciting the right action for a practitioner might not be found by identifying the “case at hand” and asking ontological questions such as “What *is* this?” (or even “How can we

together create meaning in this?"). The crucial aspect may be found in attentiveness towards the other and asking an ethical question such as "How can I step into this encounter in a way that creates space for the other participants to take their steps?" This question does not originate in me, nor in social constructions, but in the reality of the Other. The Other demands something of me and pulls me into responsibility.

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Notes

1. All names from the study are pseudonyms.
2. This quote is not published in this exact version in my dissertation that I refer to, but was picked from one of the interviews analyzed.
3. Agential realism is a concept Shotter picks up from K. Barad; he argues that it is useful in reflecting on social constructionism.
4. Rancière's ideas are not, to my knowledge, referred to as ethical realism. I think they could also be regarded as ethical realism in the sense that he directs the attention to something real which has not yet been identified within a discursive or sensible order. In this sense, he describes a reality that precedes both the epistemological and ontological domains discussed in this paper.

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