

UDC 111.1:101.8:262

DOI 10.35423/2078-8142.2018.1-2.15

Y. Shatalov,
*competitor of the Department of Cultural Studies
of the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University*

THE KNOWLEDGE OF REALITY: CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF STANLEY J.GRENZ'S METHODOLOGY

The article is devoted to the study of the knowledge of Reality in the context of critical assessment of Stanley J. Grenz's methodology. Many contemporary Evangelical scholars who study the question about our knowledge of Reality think that «critical realism» is the best model that describes the process of knowledge in the postmodern context. Grenz supports the constructivist model of knowledge. Vanhoozer believes that hermeneutical epistemology is the best rubric for discussing theological truth claims about reality. Grenz speaks about «givenness» to this world which is eschatological, and thus he talks only about eschatological objectivity. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, on whom Grenz's draws his constructivist's views, make their thesis about social construction of reality and knowledge through the language (the constructivist view). We think Grenz says that language creates our understanding of reality. The author of the article concludes that, by providing an interpretation of reality, we in some way construct it, not in a sense that we give ontological status to that which did not exist before we started talking about it, but rather in a sense of hermeneutically organizing our experience of reality into a worldview and narratives. We should conclude that the world is fundamentally given, and it is objective in a sense that it is shared by all and its truth is eloquent, though it is construed differently by those who share it. Our interpretations of reality are connected then into an imaginative projection of the world. Nevertheless it does not mean that since our projections imaginative they are necessarily fictive and do not correspond to the way things are.

Key words: Stanley J. Grenz, theological methodology, reality, communitarian theology, community.

Now as we have concluded that there is indeed Reality beyond our formulations what can we say about our knowledge of it? Many contemporary Evangelical scholars who study the same questions think that «critical realism» is the best model that describes the process of knowledge in the postmodern context. According to N. T. Wright, who applies this model to his project, the realism is critical because the access to reality lies along the «spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known». Knowledge in this model is never independent of the knower and entails critical reflection on the products of our enquiry [15, p. 35]. Naugle believes that critical realism might be called «a golden mean epistemology» which tries to avoid extremes of naïve realism on the one hand and antirealism on the other. This is the position that recognizes the proper cognitive powers of humans and while avoiding arrogance of modernity and the despair of postmodernity, it enjoys a modest, chastened view of knowledge with epistemic humility [10, p. 324–25]. There are a number of other scholars who try to do postfoundational theology with a «critical realism» epistemological model [See for example 2 or 3].

Hermeneutical Nature of Human Knowledge

Before proceeding to my understanding of the problem I would like to start with the quotation of Walsh and Middleton: «Believing that the world has a givenness that is ontologically prior to our knowing it and that this givenness comes to us as a gift of the extravagant love of the Creator makes us want to acknowledge the moment of truth in the realist claim. ... [However] the only way that we can know the world is, as the constructivist insists, via our representation of the world, our worldview, our perspective. Therefore, we must not lose the moment of truth in constructivism. Knowing is always perspectival. The question will be, how can we responsibly form a worldview that will represent the world in a way that appropriately responds to its givenness?» [9, p. 167].

This quotation demonstrates that Christian understanding of reality appeals to a kind of realism though the notion of perspectival knowledge doubts the model of «critical realism.» Grenz understands the problem and therefore he supports the constructivist model of knowledge. Moreover it was Grenz who stated that «the true world» is the «true interpretation of our situation,» hence our knowledge is always an interpretation [See 4]. But since his view can hard-

ly be distinguished from perspectivalism, I prefer not to side with Grenz. Nevertheless, together with him, I think that critical realism claims too much and asserts to know things partially «in themselves». How much critical rational work does one needs to do in order to get thing right? And how one will know he/she actually got the things right? I agree with Walsh and Middleton that the optimistic aspiration of being critical enough to finally «get the thing itself» is epistemologically impossible to realize. Critical realism seems to presuppose that the final and universally true perspective can be achieved albeit by hard work [9, p. 168].

In my opinion, James K. A. Smith has shown quite convincingly that our finitude and intesubjectivity are necessary conditions that are part and parcel of being human and living in the world. This means that we always interpret and not simply receive things as they are. Interpretation happens at every level of relationship between situated beings: «every reading of the newspaper, every conversation at the dinner table, every rude gesture on the highway must be interpreted before it is understood. Every communication is filtered through a series of questionings, largely implicit, asked with the goal of understanding» [11, p. 150–51]. In other words interpretation is a fundamental process of our knowledge formation. Building on the research of Gadamer, Naugle states that our prejudices as pretheoretical notions constitute the historical reality of humans and make them what they are. Since our prejudices are constituted by the tacit influence of history our knowing or interpretative process of the world is always conditioned [13, p. 345–46]. Then, perhaps, the term «interpretation» is the best metaphor that describes the process of knowing.

Vanhoozer believes that hermeneutical epistemology is the best rubric for discussing theological truth claims about reality because it is a viable alternative to the either-or of objectivism and relativism. In our age, where the theory-ladenness of data and the impurity of reason have been acknowledged, we must choose between absolute knowledge and hermeneutics. Hermeneutics also allows us to recover a theme of «understanding» in the epistemology, which has to do with seeing the holistic picture (wisdom) and not that much with certain propositions (rationality). To view knowledge as interpretation, according to Vanhoozer, is to «*expand and enrich* the traditional notion of epistemology» [13, p. 345–46]. The very word «interpretation», however, presupposes the possibility of *misinterpreting* and thus scares some evangelicals. But as we can see it already in Eden there was the possibility of misunderstanding in the process of interpretation. Reflecting on the diversity of Creation and even

the triune identity of God A. K. M. Adam demonstrates that divergence of interpretations is part of the created order [1, p. 99]. Interpretative diversity is not sin in itself but after the Fall it becomes the space that evil and violence inhabit. Therefore, the space of interpretation which is a part of being human is the space of hermeneutical judgment performed by finite creatures, and thus, it may be wrong. Every interpretative judgment, then, should be accomplished by humility and uncertainty [11, p. 157]. To sum up this argument, we can say that human beings always interpret reality and there is nothing wrong with that. This only means that our knowledge of reality is always aspectival or «hermeneutical» (perspectival in the «soft» sense).

The very fact that Scriptures communicate different canonical modes, as Vanhoozer has demonstrated, indicates that biblical texts render rather than mirror reality in different ways. According to him, Scripture talks «about truth» in various genres, which means that: 1) reality is differentiated and has many levels of complexity and that 2) reality cannot be limited to propositions since a canonical scheme invites us to process it (e.g., imagine, feel). Naïve realism, which wants to know the truth wholly and completely, is nothing more than idolatry [14, p. 286–90]. To support my thesis I want to bring an example. Water, indeed, can be described chemically as a molecule of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of Oxygen. However, is this description «truer» than the biological one, which describes water as a liquid with no taste and flavor? A poet perhaps would choose neither of these descriptions and would stick with a lyrical one. From this example, we can see that reality is one, but it can be described or rather interpreted in different ways. So, because we are finite, our knowing is always limited, fallible and particular. All knowing is perspectival and, thus, provisional, open to correction and deepening. Using a «linguistic theory» and coherentist epistemology as a test case, Kenneson concludes that «it is impossible to think of reality as it is in itself, apart from human judgment» [7, p. 164]. Reality appears to us only as interpretation of the state of affairs. In a similar manner Vanhoozer thinks that hermeneutics is the best description for epistemology, because knowledge is always a form of interpretation [13, p. 346].

The Subjective Nature of Human Knowledge

The statements made in the paragraphs above might disturb some readers, for it appears that hermeneutical realism presupposes the absence of robust

objectivism, which inevitably leads us to relativism. Because of the same logic, people think that Grenz really preaches relativism. For example, Kurka believes Grenz leads evangelicalism into the post-foundational trap of subjectivity, where no one can truly demand that any construction of reality is ontologically preferable to another. If reality cannot be truly known «outside of the filters of own social construction, it would seem that science and theology both are confined to accepting each and every competing understanding as a legitimate portrayal of reality» [8, p. 159].

While the notion of objectivity in Grenz indeed presents some problems, in my opinion, this criticism does not understand his perspective. First of all the subjective nature of our knowing does not necessarily presuppose absolute relativity. Second, if we perceive «objectivity» as «some permanent framework to which we can appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth and rightness» then, as Vanhoozer points out, there is simply no «objectivity» [13, p. 345]. Postmodernism has rightly shown that there is no such thing as a view from nowhere. Therefore in renewed epistemology the church becomes an indispensable hallmark, because leaving the concept of «view from nowhere» entails that such concepts as «goodness» or «truth» are embodied in the convictions and practices of communities that one meets. Philip Kenneson is one of the few evangelical scholars who celebrates that postmodernity has freed us from such concepts as «objective truth.» He then states that «the church has a word to speak to the world not because it has a message that is objectively true... [but] because it embodies an alternative politics, an alternative way of ordering human life made possible by Jesus Christ» [7, p. 162]. Though I think there are other reasons for the authority of the church's message (and yes, they will have to do with the notions of modest objectivity and trust), Kenneson is right in that the truth of the gospel does not require an objectivity concept to be true. Also James Smith has convincingly demonstrated that we inevitably «see» the world through the lenses of interpretative traditions that present it «as» something. Our readings and hearings of texts are always conditioned by our situationality and traditionality. «No discourse or interpretation,» he says, «is able to 'overcome' these conditions so as to be able to deliver the world as it 'really' is, to provide a normative interpretation that is 'purified' from such conditions» [11, p. 164]. This means that there are no «objective» and exhausting readings of the world (in the strict sense). Primitive Christianity most likely did not have a concept of objectivity at all but this did not prevent it from

spreading rapidly throughout extremely pluralistic and religious societies. Objectivity, in its *strict* sense, belongs to eschaton, as Grenz argues.

Encountering Objectivity in our Knowledge

But if there are no transcendent criteria for legitimizing interpretations, how we will judge one interpretation better than another? Perspectivalism would probably answer: «in no way». Contrary to Grenz I do not think that there is no epistemological objectivity at all. It is true that «our knowledge never rises above the Christian perspective to a perspectiveless apprehension of absolute truth» [2, p. 215]. But, nevertheless, theology deals with Scripture that mirrors reality objectively (not in a sense of communicating reality as it is, but in a sense of mirroring the truth, the way, and the life). And of course theologians strive for objectively correct (even if imperfect and incomplete) biblical description of the object. Otherwise there is no heresy but different perspectives. Therefore, a concept of modest objectivity is needed. While the doctrine of Creation presents to us an objectively given reality, the doctrine of the Fall introduces the theme of epistemic corruption into our world. Up till now I gave an account of our epistemic limitedness in the context of the Fall. The doctrine of the Fall, however, is not the most recent event in theo-drama. Our theological account needs not only the doctrine of the Creation and Fall, but also the doctrine of Redemption (Rom 12:2). Hence Christians especially should become persons of intellectual virtue that renews not only the mind but the whole of being. This «virtue epistemology» suggests that knowledge is less a matter of following correct methodology than of becoming the right sort of person [14, p. 303]. The notion of modest objectivity that I will present is built upon the doctrine of Creation together with the doctrine of Redemption.

Grenz speaks about «givenness» to this world which is eschatological, as we have seen, and thus he talks only about eschatological objectivity. However other scholars try to elaborate the concept of «givenness» as a test case for reality departing from the concept of Creation and Creator. Hence Naugle believes that «the givenness of creation and its own inherent excellence is its ‘cosmologic,’ ‘cosmosophic,’ and ‘cosmonomic’ character. At the heart of Christian tradition, therefore, is a *creational objectivity* which is the product of God’s word, wisdom, and law» [10, p. 266]. In a similar way Walsh and Middleton present the concept of «incarnation» as the test case, which basically elaborates the notion of created order for our epistemology. According to them creation order

«is not, ultimately, a product of our social construction of reality» but is «a gift from the hand of a gracious God who brings about the liberation of people laboring under the weight of imperially oppressive order» [9, p. 162]. In my opinion, we should admit that our knowing does not create reality but rather we respond to a created and integrated reality in a way that either honors and promotes that integration or dishonors the creation in its wholeness. Without recognizing that order is a gift, that it is given, we will most likely end up with competing tribes with nothing to appeal to beyond the «realities» of their own construct. Paradoxically tribal particularism is just as prone to totalizing violence as is absolutistic realism. Therefore «either constructing order apart from the gift or a supposed submission to the order of things apart from taking seriously our call to order-construction will end up in the same violent place» [Ibid., 163].

Now I will try to make a logical conclusion out of the statements made in the previous sections: if the world is objectively given then it can impose itself on our interpretative process and lead to honoring its givenness. While acknowledging the fact of our epistemological limitedness James Smith, nevertheless, argues that there is a certain interpretative norm that stands before interpretation; there are universals that are binding upon interpretation. Drawing on the phenomenological tradition and Heidegger respectively, he calls these norms «empirical transcendentals» – worldly states of affairs or the world as given and experienced. Certain transcendent to us objects, trees for example, impose themselves upon us and thus create limits for their interpretations. In this context transgressing these «given» limits will result in bad interpretation. Therefore, not all interpretations are equally valid. The reality imposes itself upon the interpreter's experience and thus represents a limit to its interpretation. Therefore, we say that «[t]here is a given/gift – creation – that every interpreter encounters. ... Truth, then, is not something uncovered; it is instead the process of *uncovering*. Truth *happens*; it is itself the uncovering that discloses something to us, something of a world that is given» [11, p. 169–70]. The binding character of that which stands before interpretation helps to avoid ubiquitous arbitrariness, allowing for plurality but not an infinite number of interpretative possibilities. The world is, so to speak, a phenomenological criterion that limits interpretation. Therefore interpretation is «subjective» only to the extent that it is a subjective construal of an objective reality [11, 174]. Every interpreter is accountable to the givenness of the world and thus responsible for honoring it.

Recognizing the givenness of our world (modest objectivity) requires one to develop intellectual virtues like openness and humility. Together with Clark I argue that there is «an internal constraint or limit that holds scholars accountable to the data of the real world,» which is recognized by a person of intellectual virtue. For example, people often change their beliefs as a result of criticism. This conversion is more than a psychological phenomenon and involves rationality and convincing facts, reasons, and criticisms. And this is not a change of perspective because people usually perceive their former convictions as false. So, Clark explains these types of conversions by epistemic virtues (such as curiosity, love for truth, honesty, etc.) that an interpreter develops in the process of uncovering the truth [2, p. 216]. To the notion of modest objectivity might be added the fact that most people indeed agree on objective evil that cannot be deduced by the view of relative social constructions is also best explained by the notion of «givenness». Even pragmatic criteria (this is bad because it hurt others) should have something beyond itself (why shouldn't we hurt others?) to make an advocate judgment [6, p. 72]. Naugle, thus, believes that from a biblical perspective the universe comes with an intrinsic meaning rooted in God, who is the reason of every being and ethics. Certain forms of behavior are right or wrong because there is an intrinsic divinely grounded moral architect [10, p. 262].

Therefore, the modest model of objectivity recognizes our historical locatedness, yet views our knowledge (not merely cognitive) as putting us in touch with God, not simply with our mental projection of God. It recognizes that there is truth and it can be uncovered in the gift of the creation by a person of epistemic virtue. Moreover, holding to the doctrine of Redemption entails allowing the subject of investigation to exert a dominant influence on our knowing process (by means of the Holy Spirit) [2, p. 217]. This is where I part with Grenz. I think that denial of the ability to know the truth at least sufficiently together with rejection of the givenness is more of an intellectual disease (or, perhaps, even spiritual) of postmodernity than achievement.

What does Constructivist View Have to Do with Reality?

Presenting all the arguments above what shall we say about the constructivist view that Grenz advances? Many evangelical scholars are very critical of any social construction theory. For example, in his critique of Grenz, Scott Smith goes on to say that, if indeed as postconservatives say, historical events

take on their character by the way people in our communities talk about them, then there is a world in which Jesus did not rise and is not the Savior (such as the Muslim world, or Buddhist one). The reality of this historical event should surpass language limitations in his opinion. Otherwise Christ is not the only way to the Father. Also if the languages construct reality then worlds, in which God knows the future and does not know it, should exist simultaneously (as the conservative and open theist communities speak about God) [12, p. 128–29].

This criticism might do justice to a radical constructivist view but, it cannot be applied to postconservative theologians and especially to Grenz. I could not find any place where Grenz would say that language creates reality *ontologically*. It is very important to note that while Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, on whom Grenz's draws his constructivist's views, make their thesis about social construction of reality and knowledge through the language (the constructivist view), they do not make any philosophical claim about the nature of reality or truth [6, p. 62]. So, while his statements can be interpreted differently, I think Grenz says that language creates our *understanding* of reality. That is how he can talk about the «world-constructing» languages of various communities and about «certain undeniable givenness» to this world at the same time [5, p. 53–54]. The short study of knowledge formation above has demonstrated that our knowing of reality is always an interpretation that unifies and gives meaning to the multiple experiences we have. Language, in this case, serves as a vehicle for constructing and uniting interpretations into a single whole. Thus, it can be said that the «world-constructing» function of language cannot be deemed as negative for Christian theology.

Hence, if the «social construction» model is understood as «the explication of the interpretation of God and the world around which the Christian community finds its identity» because «the true world means its 'true interpretation'», [4] then Grenz rightly understood the problem.

By providing an interpretation of reality, we in some way construct it, not in a sense that we give ontological status to that which did not exist before we started talking about it, but rather in a sense of hermeneutically organizing our experience of reality into a worldview and narratives. We should conclude that the world is fundamentally given, and it is objective in a sense that it is shared by all and its truth is eloquent, though it is construed differently by those who share it. Our interpretations of reality are connected then into an imaginative projection of the world. Nevertheless it does not mean that since our projections imaginative they are necessarily fictive and do not correspond to the

way things are. Moreover the binding character of the reality beyond our formulations presents necessary limitations to the process of interpretation.

REFERENCES

1. Adam, A. K. M. (2006). *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Post-modern World*. Minneapolis, Minnesota : Fortress Press.
2. Clark, David K. (2003). *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*. Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway Books.
3. Erickson, Millard J. (2001). *Truth or Consequences*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press.
4. Grenz, Stanley J. (2000). *Conversing in Christian Style: Toward a Baptist Theological Method for the Postmodern Context in Baptist History and Heritage* 35/1 (Winter, 82-10). Retrieved from: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-94160872.html>
5. Grenz, Stanley J., Franke, John R. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*. Louisville, Kentucky : Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
6. Groothuis, Douglas. (2004). Truth Defended and Defined. In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*. Millard, J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth & Justin Taylor (Eds). Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway Books, 59-80.
7. Kenneson, Philip D. (1995). There's No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing, Too. In *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*. Timothy, R. Phillips & Dennis, L. Okholm (Eds.). Downers Grove, Illinois : InterVarsity Press, 155-170.
8. Kurka, Robert C. (2007). Before 'Foundationalism': A More Biblical Alternative to the Grenz/Franke Proposal for Doing Theology. *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 50:1 (March), 145-65.
9. Middleton, J. Richard & Brian, J. Walsh. (1995). *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*. Downers Grove, Illinois : InterVarsity Press.
10. Naugle, David K. (2002). *Worldview: The History of a Concept*. Grand Rapids, Michigan : Eerdmans.
11. Smith, James K. A. (2000). The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutics. Downers Grove, Illinois : InterVarsity Press.
12. Smith, Scott. (2004). Language, theological knowledge, and the postmodern Paradigm. In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommoda-*

- tion in *Postmodern Times*. Millard, J. Erickson, Paul, Kjos Helseth & Justin, Taylor (Eds.). Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway Books, 109-136.
13. Vanhoozer, Kevin J. (2002). *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
 14. Vanhoozer, Kevin J. (2005). *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville, Kentucky : Westminster John Knox Press.
 15. Wright, Nicholas T. (1996). *Jesus and the Victory of God. Volume 2 of Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Minneapolis, MN : Fortress Press.
-

Євген Шаталов

пошукувач кафедри культурології Національного педагогічного університету імені М. П. Драгоманова, м. Київ, Україна

Уявлення про реальність: критика методології Стенлі Дж. Гренца

Анотація

Статтю присвячено дослідженню уявлення «реальність» у контексті критики методології Стенлі Дж. Гренца. Чимало сучасних євангельських богословів, які вивчають проблеми вчення про реальність, вважають, що «критичний реалізм» є найкращою моделлю, яка описує феномен знання в пост-модерністському контексті. Гренц підтримує конструктивістську модель знання. Ванхузер вважає, що герменевтична епістемологія є оптимальною парадигмою для обговорення теологічного вчення про реальність. Гренц веде мову про «даність» цього світу, який є есхатологічним, і він говорить лише про есхатологічну об'єктивність. Пітер Бергер і Томас Лукман, на концепції яких Гренц вибудовує свої конструктивістські погляди, постулюють тези про соціальне побудову реальності та знань через мову (конструктивістський погляд). На нашу думку, Гренц переконує, що мова конститує наше розуміння реальності.

Ключові слова: Стенлі Дж. Гренц, богословська методологія, реальність, богослов'я спільноти, спільнота

Евгений Шаталов

соискатель кафедры культурологии Национального педагогического университета имени М. П. Драгоманова., г. Киев, Украина

Представления о реальности: критика методологии Стэнли Дж. Гренца

Аннотация

Статья посвящена исследованию представление «реальность» в контексте критики методологии Стэнли Дж. Гренца. Многие современные евангельских богословов, изучающих проблемы учения о реальности, считают, что «критический реализм» является лучшей моделью, описывающей феномен знания в постмодернистском контексте. Гренц поддерживает конструктивистскую модель знания. Ванхузера считает, что герменевтический эпистемология является оптимальной парадигмой для обсуждения теологического учения о реальности. Гренц говорит о «данность» этого мира, который является эсхатологическим, и он говорит только о эсхатологическую объективность. Бергер и Томас Лукман, на концепции которых Гренц выстраивает свои конструктивистские взгляды, постулируют тезисы о социальном устройстве реальности и знаний через язык (конструктивистский взгляд). По нашему мнению, Гренц утверждает, что речь конституирует наше понимание реальности.

Ключевые слова: Стэнли Дж. Гренц, богословская методология, реальность, богословие сообщества, сообщество