AN ANTHOLOGY OF PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES VOLUME 12

Editor

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Edited by
Patricia Hanna

Athens Institute for Education and Research
2018

This volume is dedicated to Donald V. Poochigian
(1943-2017)

The Point
Aaron Poochigian[*]

Last month my Pops the Sage, the Brain, the Wiz,
waxed geometric, just between us guys:
"What is a point? A locus without size.
No length, no width, no depth, but there it is."
By then the specialist in What Exists
had grown so shrunken he would not survive.
(The tapeworm tubing keeping him alive
seemed to be drinking life out through his wrists.)
I get it: skin and ticker, lung and joint,
we wither faster than we feel we should.
What learns to walk lies down again for good.
A rotten deal. But what about that point
void of affliction, misery and prayer?
No length, no width, no depth, but it is there.

It seems fitting to dedicate this volume to Don: after all, he helped make the conference.

I met Don in 2005, at the first International Philosophical Conference held by ATINER. The conference had all the marks of a new born with colic, but Don's quirky sense of humor and his unexpected takes on philosophical issues helped many of keep our sanity, and see the value in the enterprise. He was a loyal supporter of the conference's aim of broadening the scope of international philosophical conversation. Don attended all the meetings through 2015; even when his health prevented his coming to Athens, he remained one of the steadiest contributors to the "back side" of a blind-reviewed journal. His wise counsel was invaluable: if the program had to be rearranged at the last minute because someone had to cancel, even when he wasn't there, he was always ready to respond to one of my emailed cries for help.

But he was more than a professional colleague--someone, you see here and there are meetings. He became a good friend to many of us. Outside the confines of the conference and the work of publishing the proceedings, he was someone I turned to for advice and general discussions of the state of the world. I counted him as a friend, as did others. He will be missed.

Patricia Hanna
Editor

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Introduction

Patricia Hanna

This volume is a collection of papers selected from those presented at the 12th International Conference on Philosophy sponsored by the Athens Institute for Research and Education (ATINER), held in Athens, Greece, 22-25 May 2017.

This conference provides a singular opportunity for philosophers from all over the world to meet and share ideas with the aim of expanding the understanding of our discipline. Over the course of the conference forty-six papers by philosophers from twenty-five countries were presented. The fourteen papers in this volume were selected for inclusion after a process of blind-review.

The papers chosen for inclusion give some sense of the variety of topics addressed at the conference. However, it would be impossible in an edited volume to ensure coverage of the full extent of diversity of the subject matter and approaches brought to the conference itself by the participants, some of whom could not travel to one another's home countries without enormous difficulty.

Since its inception in 2006, the conference has established itself as a place where philosophers from all areas of the world and all sub-genres can gather to engage in philosophical discussion. We now have a group of dedicated philosophers who serve as the reviewers for the proceedings. They are committed to raising the standards of this publication; as a result, we are now able to ensure that each submission if blind-reviewed by at least two readers, as well as the editor and/or a member of the Editorial Board. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their extraordinary work.

C H A P T E R   SIX

In Defence of Constructivism:
A Comment on the Philosophical Foundations of Qualitative Research

Atli Harðarson

A number of publications on the methodology of the social sciences set forth and discuss statements to the effect that qualitative research requires commitment to constructivism that is incompatible with the existence of objective reality and objective knowledge. I argue that these statements should be rejected and that researchers can, and should, avail themselves of the true and useful insights enshrined in constructivism without any commitments to more contestable philosophical theories. In my paper I use the following definitions:

    i.   *Metaphysical constructivism about a type of entities is the view that such entities are what they are because of what people think or say.*

    ii.   *Epistemological constructivism is the view that our knowledge is composed of elements – such as concepts, statements, and theories – that are the way they are because of convention or because of something that people think or say.*

As "constructivism" is used to designate a great variety of metaphysical and epistemological views, I do not claim that my arguments apply to all philosophical stances described by this term. Granted, however, my two definitions there are good reasons to accept both metaphysical and epistemological constructivism and the two following theses.

    a)   *Metaphysical constructivism about social reality is independent of metaphysical theories, such as materialism and idealism, about the ultimate nature of all reality.*

    b)   *Epistemological constructivism does not entail subjectivism or relativism.*

Keywords: *Constructivism, qualitative research, social reality, ontology, relativism.*

Introduction

During the last four decades, metaphysical anti-realism and epistemological relativism and subjectivism have become prominent in writings about the philosophical foundations of qualitative methods in social and educational research (Howell, 2012; Krauss, 2005; Erickson, 2011; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011). These views are expressed in different ways. Some say that there is "no objective reality" (Krauss, 2005, p. 761), others that reality is a "phenomenon of the mind" (Howell, 2012, p. 4).The expression "multiple realities" is often used to suggest the relativist and subjectivist view that people who think in different ways live in different worlds and that what is true for one person may be false for another.

The publications I have cited so far are about the history and philosophy of qualitative research. Similar statements, to the effect that what there is depends on what people think, can also be found in several works that purport to be more practical. John W. Creswell, whose textbook on qualitative methodology is widely used, says for instance: "When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities" (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). Likewise, Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann (2009, p. 49) claim that knowledge is subjective. In a third popular textbook, Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan (1998, p. 18) defend a position between the view "that reality exists and can be more or less objectively known by an unbiased observer" and that of the "postmodernists who believe that objective reality does not exist and that all knowledge is subjective and only subjective" (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 18). Some other textbooks do not take sides but still claim that qualitative researchers need to take a stand on questions about the ultimate nature of reality. Kristin G. Esterberg, for instance, says that even though answers to these questions cannot be supported by rational argument since they are "essentially, matters of faith", the researchers have to choose between thinking that there is a social world "out there" or that all social life is "constructed" (Esterberg, 2002, pp. 9–14). As I will argue later, there is no reason to think that these two options exclude one another.

In different works these philosophical assumptions carry different labels, one of the most common being "constructivism". In his book about the philosophy of methodology, Kerry E. Howell says, for instance, that according to constructivists there is no external objective reality (Howell, 2012, p. 16). Throughout the book he writes about the whole world as either constructed or as existing independently of what people think, and makes no distinction between natural and social reality. In the fourth edition of *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Yvonna S. Lincoln, Susan A. Lynham, and Egon G. Guba (2011, p. 100) likewise describe constructivism as an epistemological and metaphysical theory that supports thoroughgoing relativism and subjectivism.

Although most recent works I have come across concerning the philosophical foundations of qualitative research concur in their denial of the existence of objective reality and objective knowledge, there are also dissenting voices, e.g. Steven Eric Krauss (2005), Martyn Hammersley (2008), Joseph A. Maxwell

(2012), and Tomas Pernecky (2016). They all concede that relativism and subjectivism are rampant in the field, or as Maxwell puts it, "the dominant view in published statements on this issue is that qualitative research requires a thoroughgoing constructivist and relativist ontology and epistemology that holds that reality is itself a social construction, and has no existence outside of this construction" (Maxwell, 2012, p. viii). Nevertheless, Krauss, Hammersley, and Maxwell all support critical realism and argue that qualitative researchers had better adhere to a realist ontology where the world is supposed to exist independently of what we think. Pernecky (2016) describes different philosophies of qualitative research without taking sides. He argues, however, that both constructivism and qualitative methods can go hand in hand with many different metaphysical and epistemological views, including scientific realism and epistemic objectivism.

Much of what modern advocates of critical realism say about relativism has been said before. Ever since the time of Plato, philosophers have maintained that those who try to argue for relativism about all knowledge undermine their own position since, according to their own account, the knowledge that knowledge is relative is also relative. Ben Kotzee (2010) makes a rejoinder of this type to the cultural relativism most prominent in the social sciences and humanities and points out that "discovering things like 'this is true in that culture, but not in this other culture' itself presupposes a neutral, non-relative position from which to identify what is true in different cultures" (Kotzee, 2010, p. 181).[1]

The word "constructivism" is used to designate a great variety of philosophical views (Phillips, 1995), and although some of the works cited above describe it as involving a denial of objective reality and objective knowledge, they do not contain any arguments to prove that such a denial follows from any particular account of how social reality and knowledge are constructed. Commenting on the use of the term, Edmore Mutekwe, Amasa Ndofirepi, Cosmas Maphosa, Newman Wadesango, and Severino Machingambi (2013, p. 55) maintain that it is seldom clearly defined but often used to "distinguish the good guys (constructivists) from the bad guys (traditionalists)." Because of this loose and varied usage, it is perhaps impossible to argue for or against constructivism in general. I will therefore not try to do that but, instead, stick to the following definitions of metaphysical and

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[1]Relativism is not the only strange philosophical theme that recurs in publications about qualitative research. Another one is an account of positivism as a version of naïve realism (see e.g. Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 18; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011; Howell, 2012). Howell (2012, p. 41), for instance, labels the positivists' conception of reality "naïve realism" without any references to works of philosophers who called themselves positivists. As Joel Michell (2003) and Maxwell (2012) argue, texts on qualitative methods use the term "positivism" to describe views that are very far from those advocated by Auguste Comte and Ernst Mach in the nineteenth century and Carl Hempel and Rudolf Carnap in the first half of the twentieth century: "When advocates of qualitative methods specify what it is that they disagree with in 'positivism', it turns out to be the epistemological and ontological realism that they mistakenly attribute to it" (Michell, 2003, bls. 17). Contrary to these attributions, positivism was a brand of anti-realism. Like Kant before, the positivists tried to eliminate doubts about the veracity of science "by removing the gulf between appearance and reality that makes skepticism possible in the first place" (Searle, 1995, p. 168).

epistemological constructivism. The view I call metaphysical is also sometimes described as ontological.

    i.   Metaphysical constructivism about a type of entities is the view that such entities are what they are because of what people think or say.

   ii.   Epistemological constructivism is the view that our knowledge is composed of elements, such as concepts, statements, and theories that are the way they are, because of convention or because of something that people think or say.

I shall argue that granted these two definitions, researchers can avail themselves of the true and useful insights enshrined in both metaphysical constructivism about social reality and epistemological constructivism, without committing themselves to strange and contestable statements about the non-existence of objective reality or objective knowledge. In particular, I shall argue that there are good reasons to accept both epistemological constructivism and metaphysical constructivism about social reality, and also that there are good reasons to accept the two following theses:

   a) Metaphysical constructivism about social reality is independent of metaphysical theories such as materialism and idealism about the ultimate nature of all reality.

   b) Epistemological constructivism does not entail subjectivism or relativism.

The position I defend is compatible with critical realism and it is similar in some ways to the views supported by Krauss (2005), Hammersley (2008) and Maxwell (2012).

Idealism and Anti-realism

Although I believe we can do qualitative research in education and the social sciences without any commitment to big philosophical theories such as idealism and materialism, I think it is worthwhile to unearth the roots of some of the anti-realist views described above. Some of them go back to Immanuel Kant who argued, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, that our knowledge of the geometry of space, and various other basic features of the physical universe, could not be about a reality that existed independently of the human mind, because then it would be contestable and subject to doubt.

Maybe we should grant that empirical knowledge of mind-independent space can never guarantee the truth of geometrical propositions such as that the angular sum of all triangles is exactly 180 degrees. Since no instruments of measurement are absolutely exact, empirical tests can only show this to be true within some margin of error, and only of triangles in parts of space that are close enough to be accessible and big enough to be measureable. So if it were known with

"apodeictic certainty", as Kant (1781/1980, p. 85) thought it was, that the propositions of Euclidean geometry applied to physical space, then that space would not be a mind-independent reality that we only knew empirically. Kant concluded that the laws of nature were imposed on the world by our ways of perceiving and thinking, and that any reality behind appearances was forever beyond our ken. A simplified version of his argument can be laid out this way:

> Premise 1: If the geometry of space is known with certainty, then space is mind-dependent.
> Premise 2: The geometry of space is known with certainty.
> Conclusion: Space is mind-dependent.

Kant supported premise 1 with some of the most sophisticated arguments in the history of western philosophy and took them to prove his conclusion because he did not worry much about premise 2. Since his time, however, it has dawned upon the world of science that premise 2 is false. Scientific conjectures about the curvature of intergalactic space and strange geometries inside atomic nuclei are anything but indubitable. Nevertheless, Kant's conclusion is the foundation of later idealistic philosophy. As Jeremy Dunham, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Sean Watson (2014) put it in their book about the history of idealism:

> Once Kant opened up the question of the determination of experience, the whole area was ripe for various forms of exploration. If experience is determined by *a priori* cognitive structures, then what if those structures are, themselves, determined by factors outside themselves? Such questions came to dominate the intellectual history of the twentieth century in a variety of forms (Dunham, Grant, and Watson, 2014, p. 99).

In his history of continental anti-realism, Lee Braver (2007) tells a story that begins with Kant, goes through the works of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, and ends with Foucault, Derrida, and contemporary continental philosophy. In this story, the contribution of mind to reality becomes more and more subject to change. Kant described fixed categories that structure the only world we can know. He thought that, although the basic features of the physical universe were mind-dependent, they were the same for all people at all times. Hegel argued that the categories changed from one historical epoch to another. For Heidegger they depended on transient conceptual schemes "which determine humanity's essence along with the rest of reality" (Braver, 2007, p. 472), and some of his successors describe them as even more fleeting and ephemeral.

The subjectivism, relativism, and anti-realism in textbooks about qualitative research seem in many cases to be, at least partially, fuelled by these developments in continental philosophy. This is, however, not saying that philosophical idealists generally support such views. According to Dunham, Grant, and Watson (2014), labelling all types of idealism anti-realist begs the question concerning the character of reality. Many types of idealism involve accounts of what reality is

independently of what we think and, to the best of my knowledge, most idealists believe that materialism would be false even should it be universally believed to be true.

The core tenet of idealism, that ideas or minds are in some way primary and the material secondary or derivative, entails neither subjectivism nor relativism. In the history of western philosophy we have many examples of objective idealism (Dunham, Grant and Watson, 2014, p. 26). Nevertheless, those who think that the physical universe is a phenomenon of the mind, and that material things are what they are because of what people think or say, typically subscribe to some form of idealism. The types of metaphysical constructivism about the world of nature that I know of are subspecies of idealism. As I will argue in the next section of this paper, metaphysical constructivism about social reality is, nevertheless, equally compatible with idealism and materialism.

I do not know of any conclusive arguments for or against the view that ideas or minds are in some way primary and the material secondary or derivative. What I think I do know, is that some of the most prominent strains of modern idealism were originally based on an assumption that is not true, namely that the geometry of space and some other basic features of the physical universe are known with certainty. It does not follow from that, however, that idealism is false. Questions about the relation between mind and matter are still open. If I am right about this, then, in so far as it is advisable to use the least controversial premises that suffice to ground one's conclusions, people doing qualitative research should avoid using theoretical foundations that involve either idealism or materialism.

The Social World

Regardless of what we otherwise think about metaphysics, we need to distinguish social reality from the natural world. Borders between states, for instance, are social phenomena in a sense that rivers are not. Political states and the borders between them do not exist unless people take them to exist, and they vanish as soon as they are not recognized. Once there was a border between East and West Germany. It isn't there anymore. It ceased to be when people decided to unify Germany. After that, the fences were just fences, and not a border. A few centuries ago, there was no border between the United States and Mexico. These political bodies did not exist. The border became reality when these states were recognized, and the recognition was all it took to create the border.

The requisite recognition does not have to amount to endorsement. Someone who thinks that the world would be better without any states or borders realises that borders are acknowledged by the general public and by legislatures that are accepted as such. We can know that some social fact depends on subjective attitudes without believing that those attitudes are right or beneficial.

In a footnote to the first chapter of his *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx says that "one man is king only because other men stand

in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king" (Marx as cited in Searle, 2010, p. 107). Marx's point about kings is similar to the one I am making about borders. Anyone can be dressed in a purple robe and eat off a plate of gold, but it is not possible to be a king without being recognized as such. Fences and walls can be just about anywhere, but they are not borders unless people take them to be borders.

Borders and kings are borders and kings because of what people think or say. Therefore, metaphysical constructivism (as defined by i) is the true account of how and why they are what they are. Rivers, on the other hand, will continue to flow to the sea no matter what people think or say. They did so before there were any humans around and will probably continue to do so after the last man has passed away.

What I have said about states, borders, and kings applies to all sorts of social institutions, e.g. marriage and money. Marriage comes to exist through a verbal utterance, typically following a ceremonious declaration given by a priest, provided the utterance is thought of as binding. Tokens, coins, or digital data are money by virtue of being accepted as money. Metaphysical constructivism about such social phenomena is obviously, and even trivially, true. It is not a theory one can choose to reject. Talking of borders, kings, marriage, or money as existing independently of what people say, think, and believe is simply wrong, just as wrong as talking about rivers as upshots of human discourse or declarations.

A distinction between the social and the natural is necessary, regardless of whether we think of the whole of reality as mind-dependent or not. If the world only exists as experience or as something mind-dependent, then the demarcation between the social and the natural must be drawn within experience or within the mind.

The most sophisticated account of social phenomena as constituted by declarations and beliefs that I have read was expounded by John R. Searle. In his book, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, he argued that although statements about social facts are objective "the facts corresponding to them are all created by human subjective attitudes" (Searle, 2010, p. ix). Summarizing his account of social reality, he says that lots of phenomena are mental in an obvious sense, e.g. hopes, fears, and pains, while others, such as mountains and molecules, are totally independent of the mind. In addition to the mental and the non-mental, we need to introduce a class of phenomena that are social, such as money and marriage. They are not actually located in our minds but are, however, dependent on our attitudes. Searle takes care to distinguish the social from mental states, which, "exist regardless of what anybody outside thinks about them" (Searle, 2010, p. 17). Since Searle published his account of how social reality is created, J. P. Smit and Filip Buekens (2017) have provided a plausible game-theoretical description of the mechanism whereby important elements of the social world are constructed.

About this social reality that only exists by virtue of what people say or think, we can, as Searle (2010, p. 18) says, have objective knowledge. The

distinction between epistemological subjectivism and objectivism is independent of the distinction between metaphysical subjectivism and objectivism. Once this has been said clearly, as Searle does, it can hardly be a matter of dispute. My knowledge of where the border is between Mexico and the United States is about as objective as my knowledge about where the Rio Grande flows to the Gulf of Mexico. Facts about social geography are objectively known, as are facts about physical geography, although the former are what they are by virtue of what people think or say.

Searle's account of social reality is constructivist in the metaphysical sense. It is unlike most works on constructivism, however, because it is primarily analytical, not normative and political.

That things could be otherwise

In his monograph, *The Social Construction of What?* Ian Hacking says that the very first book to have "social construction" in the title was *The Social Construction of Reality*: *A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Hacking, 1999, p. 24). In this book, originally published in 1966, Berger and Luckmann (1966/1971) argued that although social reality is constituted by subjective meanings, people tend to reify it and experience it as objective facts they cannot control. According to their account, people see much of social reality in the same way that the subjects Marx wrote about saw their king: as something that is what it is, independently of what they think about it. Through reification, the social world thus becomes alien and inhuman.

The constructivism of Berger and Luckmann is, like Searle's account of social reality, a metaphysical theory. It is, though, not only an account of what social reality is. It is also meant to describe how and why people experience it as something other than it is, and come to think of it as facts they cannot change. Berger and Luckmann did not see this as giving rise to any subjectivism or relativism about knowledge. Rather, they maintain, "the scientific universe of meaning is capable of attaining a good deal of autonomy as against its own social base" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966/1971, p. 104), and they seem to think that knowledge about how social reality is constructed by humans is both objective and liberating.

Ian Hacking (1999) argues that since the publication of Berger's and Luckmann's book, most scholars who write about the social construction of this or that want their works to serve some moral or political purpose. Social constructivists about a type of phenomena, X, tend to hold that "X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things, it is not inevitable." He adds that constructivists often go further and urge that we would be better off "if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed" (Hacking, 1999, p. 6).

Sally Haslanger (2012, pp. 183–218) draws upon Hacking's work and provides a detailed and well-worked analysis of how and why the insights gained

by unmasking the ontology of gender and race as socially constructed are compatible with realism and objectivism. On her account, objective properties and differences abound, and we can use them to classify people and things in better or worse ways.

Both Hacking and Haslanger point out that many social phenomena are obviously constructed in the sense that they are contingent upshots of social arrangements. Constructivists, however, normally do not bother to emphasise that something is socially constructed unless it is mistakenly thought to be inevitable or independent of human talk, thought, customs and social institutions. Therefore, we do not find books about the social construction of money or the British monarchy (Hacking, 1999, p. 12). The very point of calling something socially constructed is, according to Hacking, to show that it is less inevitable and more dependent on human thoughts, discourse, actions, or social conventions than it is taken to be. Some of the targets of constructivists' criticism are what Hacking (1999, pp. 103–109) calls interactive kinds. The class of criminals is an example, because classifying a group of people as criminals is apt to change their thoughts and conduct. Applying the concept thus affects the social reality it is applied to. Examples abound since criminalizing activities of various kinds, from abortion to cannabis use, has wrought havoc in countries around the globe.

Knowledge about phenomena that are socially constructed sometimes interacts with the subject matter it is about, changing people's subjective attitudes and thereby the reality that is constituted by these attitudes. There are also other ways in which knowledge and information change the reality they are about. Writing a diary may, for instance, help someone mend his ways and thus affect the biography that is produced. In such cases we can even say, as Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p. 63) do, that truth is made rather than found. That, however, doesn't make whatever people put in their diaries true.

Berger and Luckman, and most of their immediate successors, did not advocate universal constructivism, as some recent textbooks on qualitative methods seem to do. In my view, metaphysical constructivism about the whole of reality is not only wildly implausible but also irresponsible. Claiming that the whole of reality is socially constructed would make the effects of a nuclear holocaust as dependent on how we think and talk as the effects of criminalizing drug abuse. It is hard to see how those who are constructivists about the whole of reality could counter someone who claims that atomic bombs can be rendered harmless by changing the ways we conceive of scorching heat or self-propagating nuclear chain reactions. (The reason that they ought to be destroyed and banned is that it is an objective truth that they can kill us all, quite regardless of what we think or say.)

Maybe it is neither customary nor fashionable to talk about the social construction of phenomena such as borders and money that are obviously constituted by thoughts and verbal utterances. Still, it seems to me that the time has come to be more mindful that the nature of borders and money depends on human attitudes and utterances. (The monetary regime was, for instance, radically changed by political decree when the gold standard was abolished in 1971.) Tens

of millions of refugees and debts that are exhausting whole societies are consequences of social facts about borders and money that are what they are because of what people think or say.

So far, I have pointed out reasons to accept metaphysical constructivism about social reality. I have also argued that these reasons are independent of grand metaphysical theories such as materialism and idealism. It remains to explain why I am also in favour of epistemological constructivism.

Theories, Models, Maps, and Descriptions

Hammersley (2008) argues that constructivism about knowledge is partially a platitude because all accounts of reality are man-made and based on traditions. He also argues, quite convincingly in my view, that this gives us no reason to believe that two contradictory accounts can both be true, or that all attempts to describe reality succeed. Likewise, Maxwell (2012) expounds constructivist epistemology and argues that it is compatible with his view of knowledge as objective:

> We believe that the earth was round and revolved around the sun long before humans understood this, and most of us believe that global warming is occurring, with potentially serious consequences for humanity, regardless of how many people deny it. We also believe that our knowledge about these things is never complete or infallible, but is always partial and subject to revision (Maxwell, 2012, p. vii).

Maxwell and Hammersley are both fallibilists, as both think of scientific knowledge as uncertain and subject to review. According to the chapter on scientific realism in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* "realists are generally fallibilists" (Chakravartty, 2016). In this same chapter, it is also argued that social constructivism about knowledge, i.e. accounts to the effect that knowledge depends on social factors, can be consistent with realism.

I suspect that one of the reasons why some researchers prefer subjectivism and relativism to fallibilism, is that they are unwilling to cope with the uncertainty they face if they admit that the reality they try to investigate and understand exists independently of their theories, models, maps, and descriptions. This unwillingness seems to be intensified by talking of research as knowledge production, something akin to industry and commerce rather than a never-ending journey, search, or conversation. This metaphor makes people ill at ease with the truth that they cannot tell for certain whether their works contain real knowledge, or just hypotheses that may later turn out to be false.

I shall end this with a few words in support of the type of epistemological constructivism advocated by Hammersley and Maxwell, i.e. the view that our knowledge is composed of concepts, statements, models, and theories that are

the way they are because of human conventions or something that people think or say.

Statements about what we know, or think we know, rely on a conceptual repertoire that is largely dependent on social conventions but also partially constructed through decisions and agreements, as, for instance, the metric system of measurement. This is generally true regardless of whether we are talking about knowledge of nature or society. A map showing rivers and other aspects of physical geography is quite as much dependent on cartographers' conventions as maps showing borders and other aspects of social geography. There is no way to draw a map without relying on some interpretation of lines, symbols, and colours that depend on what people think or say. This does not make the knowledge depicted on a map subjective in any sense. A map showing a border where there is no border, or a river where there is no river, is simply and objectively wrong. Knowledge about some reality that supervenes on subjective attitudes can be quite as objective as knowledge about the brute facts of nature. As Hacking (1999) points out, rent, for instance, is socially constructed and only exists because of something people assume and believe. A tenant can, nevertheless, have objective knowledge about the consequences of not paying her landlord.

To sum up, that some aspects of reality – such as borders, money, rent, or marriage –are socially constructed does not exclude objective knowledge about them. Neither does the fact that something, such as a river, is the way it is independently of what we think, imply that theories, models, and maps of it are anything other than man made.

We can make different maps: one with, say, 10 meters and another with 50 meters between contour lines, one using colours to show population density, and another using the same colours to depict annual precipitation or zoning regulations. Different maps serve different purposes and there are countless ways to map, correctly, the same territory, none of which is the one and only right way. This has, though, nothing to do with subjectivism or relativism. No matter what conventions cartographers adopt, their maps are useless if they do not match some facts about the surface of the earth. And yes, facts that only exist by virtue of something people think or say, about borders and zoning for example, are socially constructed facts about the surface of the earth, and not about the human mind. It is a matter of course that, if a part of the Mexican border is in the same place as the Rio Grande, and the river is not in my mind, then neither is the border. We do not have to choose between thinking of the social world as either constructed or out there. It is both.

I think something similar is true of knowledge of the type that is typically acquired by using qualitative methods of research. There is no one right way to describe another human being, or a day in the life of a school-class, any more than there is one right way to map a territory. Countless different descriptions can be true. If someone thinks this gives occasion to talk about multiple realities, I have no objection provided it is recognized that there are also countless different descriptions that are false. I prefer, though, to think of one reality that is so rich

and multifarious that no theory, model, map, or description can capture but a tiny bit of it.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that metaphysical constructivism is true about social reality but not about physical reality or the world of nature. I have also argued that this applies regardless of whether the ultimate truth about the universe is some sort of idealism or materialism, and that researchers can, and should, avoid committing themselves to proposed answers to unsolved metaphysical quandaries or strange and contestable statements about the non-existence of objective reality and objective knowledge.

Finally, I have argued that epistemological constructivism is generally true about all theories, models, maps, and descriptions. It applies regardless of whether the subject matter is social or natural reality, and this fact about human knowledge has nothing to do with subjectivism or relativism.

Acknowledgements

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