Constructed Worlds, Contested Truths

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The world is made up of not only natural kinds but also artefacts, stuff that we human beings, individually or communally, construct. Chairs and tables, airplanes and buildings, are our constructs; they are conceived by individuals or groups and are also built by them. But the scope of our construction is not limited to physical artefacts; the social space is also populated by our constructions. A university, to take but one example, is much more than its buildings, its very existence depends on rules, agreements, conventions, and covenants constructed and entered upon by human beings. It's our joint intention, persisting through time that gives reality to institutions of higher education and their functioning through time. This much is platitudinous and not seriously in dispute. Major philosophical debates begin firstly when we try to draw a dividing line between natural kinds and artefacts and secondly in any attempt to adjudicate on the ontological status of our social constructs.

Social constructionism, or constructivism[1], defined broadly, maintains that a diverse range of objects – among them emotions, gender, race, sex,

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[1] There is great deal of confusion in the terminology used in this area. Some authors present social constructionism as a sociological theory (Berger/Luckmann 1966) and constructivism as a psychological, individualistic, one (John Piaget). Boghossian uses 'constructivism' to discuss what I call 'social construction', but this is a terminological difference only and I believe the target of his criticism is what many have called 'social constructionism'.

sexual orientation, mental illness, technology, and even facts, reality, and truth – are products of explicit or implicit agreement by social actors and hence are socially constructed by them.

It has frequently been argued that social constructionism is a relativistic doctrine. In fact Paul Boghossian's book *Fear of Knowledge* is subtitled, *Against Relativism and Constructivism*. Sokal in his famous science wars attack on relativism also targets constructionist views of science. Relativism, at first blush, involves the claim that values, moral and cognitive, and even objects depend for their existence on an evaluative or ontological context, in other words, their existence is not sui generis but context-dependent, and hence relative to particular frameworks of evaluation. Once we allow the possibility of social construction in any given domain – values, norms, theories, objects, institutions, facts, etc. – then the possibility of relativising these constructs to the context and conditions of their construction arises. At least part of the reason is that, Boghossian claims,

> to say of something that it is socially constructed is to emphasize its dependence on contingent aspects of our social selves. It is to say: This thing could not have existed had we not built it; and we need not have built it at all, at least not in its present form. Had we been a different kind of society, had we had different needs, values, or interests, we might well have built a different kind of thing, or built this one differently. The inevitable contrast is with a naturally existing object, something that exists independently of us and which we did not have a hand in shaping[2].

Such contingency and dependence is an important feature of relativism, so the connection between relativism and social construction is assumed without much argument.

Beyond this rather elementary point, however, the exact relationship between these two philosophical positions has often been left unexamined.[3] This paper attempts to fill a gap in the already extensive literature on relativism by examining the relativistic consequences of different social constructionist claims. In particular, I will argue that the relationship between social constructionism and relativism is more complicated than originally assumed and that even the more radical forms of social con-

2 Boghossian 2001.
3 One exception is Paul Boghossian article 'What is Social Construction?'. I will return to this work in the course of my paper, however, it should be stated that Boghossian's very strong anti-relativism presupposes the connection between relativism and social constructionism rather than explaining it.

structionism, the ones that are the target of vocal anti-relativists such as Boghossian, do not have the relativistic consequences often attributed to them.

Claims of social construction are motivated by different philosophical considerations and take a variety of forms – ranging from the wholly unobjectionable to the wildly implausible. Their common starting point is the thought that some things come into existence by virtue of human decisions and collective intentions, but constructivists disagree on the range of the 'objects' of construction and the underlying motivation for their creation. In what follows I will explore three constructivist claims and examine their connections with relativism.

The Construction of Social Facts

Certain institutional facts uncontroversially come to exist as a consequence of agreements and decisions taken by agents acting within specific social settings. Money, newspapers, the game of chess, universities are examples of institutional facts. What is needed for the construction of social institutions and social facts is collective intentionality or 'we-intention'. Social facts come about when 'we impose rights, responsibilities, obligations, duties, privileges, entitlements, penalties, authorizations, permissions […] in order to regulate relations between people'[4]. We create a social reality when through collective actions, via our collective intentionality, we impose functions on entities that cannot perform these functions without that imposition.[5] Institutional facts presuppose human intentionality and in this they differ from brute facts which are wholly mind-independent.[6]

Searle uses the formula '*X counts as Y in context C*' to explain what counts as a social object. The necessary components of the account are:

1. Certain physical objects

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4 Searle 1995, p. 100.
5 See Searle 1995, p. 41.
6 John Searle 1995 uses this terminology to distinguish between 'brute facts', which can and do exist independently of human beings and their institutions and 'institutional facts', which do not.

2. Certain cognitive acts or states in virtue of which such physical objects acquire certain special sorts of functions
3. These functions themselves
4. Contexts in which the given cognitive acts or states are effective.

1 is a requirement because institutional facts exist, so to speak on top of brute physical facts.[7] Their existence presupposes some brute facts. 2 and 3 are crucial to the account because social institutions are primarily defined in terms of their functions and powers. For instance, money gives us the power to buy things, newspapers function as a way of disseminating up-to-date information and shaping public opinion. Social facts are not uniform in the operation of their functions. Some social facts perform their functions in virtue of the physical properties of the objects constituting them, but this is not true of an important subclass of social facts, namely so-called institutional facts. For instance, the physical properties of a piece of paper are not enough to give them the power of purchase in a market place. The piece of paper would be recognized as a bill only within the norms and constitutive rules surrounding a currency, rules that presuppose the collective intention and willingness to operate according to certain financial norms and regulations.

Social facts and their functions, according to Searle, are observer relative. A piece of metal, for instance, will count as a coin with power of purchase only relative to a particular institutional and historical context. Change the context and the piece of metal no longer has the function and power of money and hence ceases to be a token of this particular type of socially constructed object (condition 4). Without a humanly constructed and contingent context of rules, expectations and agreements, newspapers, universities or money would not exist, or may exist with a very different set of characteristics and attributes. In that sense, institutional facts are context dependent and hence relative. But such relativism is in no way pernicious. You can have absolute truths about universities or money, while accepting that the institution itself is contingently dependent on human intentions.

Searle, a Realist (with a big R) about the physical world and its brute facts, wishes to extend realism to the 'socially constructed world' with its

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7 See Searle 1995, p. 35.

socially constructed facts. For a Realist, both the natural and the social facts can act as truth makers and some version of the correspondence theory of truth would be applicable to our descriptions of both the natural and the social world. Money and banks, newspapers, laws and courts are just as real in this perspective as rocks and stones but their reality is derivative, it depends on the collective intentionality of those who have brought them into existence and have sustained them through time.

Realism concerning observer relative and observer dependent facts and entities faces a number of challenges, particularly when it comes to the ontological statues of 'real' but socially constructed facts. Do these socially constructed facts supervene on the collective intentions that gave rise to them? Are they in some way reducible to the collective intentions of the participating actors? Reductionism of the latter type is favoured by many realists, but it is difficult to see how it could be achieved when the target of reduction is the dispersed and transient phenomenon of collective intentionality. Searle insists that we-intentionality cannot be reduced to the I-intentionality of the individuals responsible for creating a given social fact, but once such reduction is eschewed, the only options left are either to fall back on some form of anti-realism or to treat we-intentionality as a brute fact. Searle chooses this second alternative, but as many commentators have pointed out, the solution seems ad hoc and merely a device to retain realism about both social facts and physical facts.

Thus, although Searle's characterization of social facts in no way commits him to the views targeted by anti-relativists such as Paul Boghossian, the lack of clarity surrounding the idea of collective intention and its ontological status do not allow for straightforward realism about social reality.

Social Construction of Theories

It is common in philosophical discussions of constructionism to distinguish between the social construction of theories – ways of thinking about the world, representing, or modelling it – as opposed to the construction of objects and institutions.[8] The thought is that there is a differ-

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8 See Haslanger 1995, Andreasen 1998, Hacking 1999, Mallon 2003, 2004.

ence between the construction of 'ideas' vs. the construction of 'objects',[9] or between the epistemological as opposed to the metaphysical senses of 'construction'.[10]

The point here is different from the claim made by Ron Mallon, in his *Philosophy Compass* article 'A Field Guide to Social Construction'. Mallon warns against what he sees as an unfortunate but common confusion. He says:

> Many constructionist claims that are apparently about objects can be reinterpreted as primarily about theories. This reinterpretation allows a deflationary reading of many of the most provocative constructionist claims – claims that are putatively about objects. On this deflationary reading, these claims stem from the (wilful or accidental) conflation of a theory or other representation of a thing with the thing itself. While it is quite surprising to think that putatively natural phenomena like sex or race or quarks are the result of our culture or decisions, it is not nearly as surprising to think that our theories and beliefs about these and other phenomena vary sharply from culture to culture.[11]

As an example Mallon cites Laqueur's book *Making Sex* (1990) and his claim that there is an "unstable female body" but says that upon investigation it turns out that the claim is neither about sex nor the female body but about the theories we produce and entertain regarding the female body.[12]

Although, inevitably, there is a certain degree of confusion in discussions of constructionism about facts *vs.* beliefs, I think there is a more significant philosophical point at stake here, one that arises out of conflicting philosophical intuitions and cannot simply be dismissed as a sign of conceptual confusion – a point that goes to the heart of the debate between the so-called metaphysical realists and post-Kantian anti-realists.

The thesis that our beliefs about the world and the descriptions we use

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9   See, for example, Hacking 1999, pp. 21 ff.

10   Boghossian 2001 writes: "It is crucial, therefore, to distinguish between a constructionist claim that's directed at things and facts, on the one hand, and one that's directed at beliefs on the other, for they are distinct sorts of claim and require distinct forms of vindication. The first amounts to the metaphysical claim that something is real but of our own creation; the second to the epistemic claim that the correct explanation for why we have some particular belief has to do with the role that that belief plays in our social lives, and not exclusively with the evidence adduced in its favour. Each type of claim is interesting in its own way".

11   Mallon 2007, p. 96 f.

12   See Mallon 2007, p. 105 Fn. 9. Similar concerns have been expressed by Boghossian and Hacking who bemoan the careless move from the epistemological to the ontological.

to talk about it, including our scientific theories, are social constructions may at first glance appear uncontroversial. After all, it is a truism that we construct theories, for any linguistic representation about the world centrally involves the very human act of language-use. It is also true that science is a social activity and that scientists follow norms and procedures that are sanctioned by their institutional practices; in that sense, the activities of the scientific community have the imprint of their group thinking. Moreover, it is undoubtedly useful to be aware of the consensual nature of scientific practice and to take account of the connections between science and other aspects of our lives, politics and economics in particular. But none of these concessions to the sociologists of science should compel us to move from truisms about the process of scientific enquiry to the startling conclusion that *what* scientists discover or investigate are mere social constructs. However, this is not what the claims about the social construction of theories, as opposed to the social construction of facts, the topic of the next section, amounts to. Although, undoubtedly, a level of confusion exists in the literature, what critics have failed to note is the underlying profound philosophical disagreement that separates the constructionists about theories from their opponents. One important feature of this disagreement is the denial of the very distinction between the epistemological and the metaphysical, a feature of the stronger forms of post-Kantian anti-realism as well as some strands of pragmatism and neo-pragmatism. The neo-pragmatist of this philosophical orientation is defended by Richard Rorty, for instance, when addressing the question of whether a statement such as 'dinosaurs roamed the earth' can be seen as eternally and mind-independently true. He says:

> Once you describe something as a dinosaur, its skin colour and sex life are causally independent of your having so described it. But before you describe it as a dinosaur, or anything else, there is no sense to the claim that it is "out there" having properties.[13]

Boghossian objects to this line of argument by protesting that the very idea that facts about dinosaurs are a *consequence* of scientific theorizing is absurd. Scientific theories do not make it true or false that dinosaurs existed; the causal nexus runs in the opposite direction. He admits that 'science made it true that we *came to believe* that dinosaurs and quarks

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13   Rorty 1998, p. 87.

exist' but this does not mean that science made it true that dinosaurs and quarks exist because 'science cannot construct those things; at best, it can discover them'.

However, Boghossian's facile dismissal of a set of strongly held philosophical intuitions, what he calls 'Kant's discredited transcendental idealism', would not convince the many philosophers who, to varying degrees, share these intuitions. The guiding idea of Kant's transcendental idealism is that although we can and should accept the reality or existence of a mind-independent world, or 'the thing in itself', and that we can even subscribe to what Michael Devitt calls 'Fig Leaf Realism' all we can know, in any detail, is the phenomenal world or the world as represented to us through our perceptions or conceptions. What Thomas Nagel memorably called 'the view from nowhere' is not accessible to epistemic agents like us who are always and inevitably perspectival in our epistemic orientation towards that world. Once we take the Kantian philosophical intuition seriously, as many anti-realists do, it becomes easy to accept that all our claims about the world bear the imprint of the human mind and the fact that "the trail of the human serpent is […] over everything"[14].

Nelson Goodman offers the strongest version of this neo-Kantian strain of constructivism. The root idea of Goodman's approach is a rejection of Realism with a capital R, the view that there is a ready-made world with objects and properties that are independent of our descriptions.[15] Goodman, crucially, argues that symbols have a formative function because "we are confined to ways of describing whatever is described"[16]. A vast variety of versions in science, in arts, is also reflective of our insights and interests. We cannot test a version by comparing it with a world undescribed, undepicted, unperceived.[17] We can hold on to the idea of an underlying world bereft of all descriptions, depictions, etc., if we like, but on the whole, it is a world well lost. Most importantly, "we can have words without a world but no world without words or other symbols"[18].

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14   James 1907, p. 64.
15   For examples of such realism see Wittgenstein in the Tractatus, some formulations of Russell's scientific realism where he talks about facts and Frege's Platonism.
16   Goodman 1978, p. 3.
17   See Goodman 1978, p. 4.
18   Goodman 1978, p. 6.

Worldmaking is carried out in many different ways. Chief among them are:

(a) Composition and decomposition: putting together and taking apart.

This primarily is a linguistic/conceptual activity for it is normally effected by the "application of labels: names, predicates, gestures, pictures, etc."[19],

(b) By giving differing weightings to the same classes present in each world, e.g. what count as relevant or irrelevant, which one is emphasised,

(c) Ordering, e.g., twelve-tone scale, vs. eight-tone scale, ordering of brightness in colour, ordering of hues,

(d) Deletion and supplementation, weeding out of some elements and adding or filling in of other elements,

(e) Deformation, which depending on point of view may be seen as correction or distortion.

Goodman allows that we require criteria for success in our world making projects as well as standards of evaluation for their varying outcomes. Truth, he admits, remains relevant to assessing those versions that have a linguistic or verbal form, but he thinks truth should not be defined as correspondence or agreement with the world. His own preferred view is a combination of coherence and epistemic accounts where

> A version is taken to be true when it offends no underlying beliefs and none of its own precepts. Among beliefs unyielding at a given time may be long-lived reflections of laws of logic, short-lived reflections of recent observations, and other convictions and prejudices ingrained with varying degrees of firmness. Among precepts, for example, may be choices among alternative frames of reference, weightings, and derivational bases.[20]

In this way, Goodman parts company with the relativists who either relativise truth and falsity to contextual factors or, following Rorty, simply

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19 Goodman 1975, p. 62.
20 Goodman 1978, p. 17.

deny its significance.[21] However, Goodman's famous example of a world-making enterprise seems like a field-guide for social constructionism. He tells us:

> Now as we thus make constellations by picking out and putting together certain stars rather than others, so we make stars by drawing certain boundaries rather than others. Nothing dictates whether the skies shall be marked off into constellations or other objects. We have to make what we find, be it the Great Dipper, Sirius, food, fuel, or a stereo system.[22]

Goodman has been accused of confusing the elementary distinction between use and mention. The charge is that he confuses the fact that we make the word 'star' and we create the concept *star*, but we don't make stars. Similarly, we make true sentences such as 'Sirius is a star' but we don't make it true that Sirius is a star.[23] But this response begs the question against Goodmanian irrealism, for the very idea of the distinction between use and mention, once it's seen as something more than a mere linguistic device, presupposes the idea of a ready-made world full of stars and constellations and such like and a language separable from it, presuppositions that the anti-realists deny.

If the above is correct, then social constructionism about theories may be seen as a version of anti-realism and at best leading to conceptual relativity which relativises ontology, or what there is, to paradigms (Kuhn), theories (Quine), or concepts (Putnam). This form of relativism, however, falls well short of advocating the culture dependence of truth, rationality and knowledge. Interestingly, many conceptual relativists, Quine and Putnam in particular, have in fact argued strongly against cultural relativism and its absurd and self-defeating conclusions.

Conceptual relativism, of course, faces serious criticisms, the most prominent of which revolves around its attendant incommensurability. Donald Davidson, for instance, has famously argued against the coher-

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21 Boghossian offers a number of criticisms of what he calls the 'cookie cutter' relativism of Goodman but the criticisms are effective against a reading of Goodman that make him appear even more unreasonably relativistic than he actually is. For instance, Boghossian asks how we could have created objects that predate us, but I think this criticism presupposes objectual interpretation of Goodman in ways that was not intended by Goodman.
22 Goodman 1984, p. 36.
23 This criticism has been levelled by Hilary Putnam, among others, who in recent decades has been more favourably disposed towards Goodman than many other philosophers.

ence of the very idea of a conceptual scheme.[24] Briefly put, for Davidson something counts as a language, and hence a conceptual scheme or a theory, only if it is translatable. Relativism presupposed radical divergence between alternative conceptual schemes, but Davidson makes it *a priori* impossible for languages or paradigms to be incommensurable or untranslatable. According to him, the idea of a language forever beyond our grasp is incoherent in virtue of what we mean by a system of concepts; a worldview allegedly governed by a paradigm radically different from ours will necessarily turn out to be very much like our own. Elsewhere I have argued that Davidson in fact does not succeed in his attempt to prove the incoherence of the idea of conceptual schemes.[25] The aim of this paper is not to argue against various forms of relativism but to lay bear the connections between different versions of social construction and their putative relativistic consequences.

The Social Construction of Facts

The third and strongest version of social constructivism is at times expressed as an extension of 2, hence the justified complaint by Boghossian about a possible confusion between the construction of theories and the social construction of facts. But the two versions of constructionism could and should be kept separate. In its most provocative versions, the claim is that the world as studied by scientists is itself a social construction. The view utilises anti-realist considerations, similar to those outlined above, but additionally maintains that the recognition of the constructivist features of our theories should lead us to accept that the very facts those theories purport to describe are human constructs. This brand of constructionism also highlights the social determinants of scientific practice, something that anti-realists such as Goodman and Rorty did not bring into their arguments. The contents of theories, they maintain, are determined by the self-interest of the powerful (the wealthy, the white, the male) in retaining their power. Charles Mills, for example, suggests that the borders of racial categories were decided in such a way as to "establish and maintain the privileges of different groups. So, for

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24   See Davidson 1984, p. 190.
25   See Baghramian 1998, 2004.

example, the motivation for using the one-drop rule to determine black racial membership is to maintain the subordination of the products of 'miscegenation'"[26].

Other examples of this stronger form of social constructionism can be found in the work of Karin Knorr-Cetina who states: "My version of the thesis [of constructivism] has been that science secretes an unending stream of entities and relations that make up 'the world'"[27]. And even more strikingly in Bruno Latour, who proposes that scientific facts are "constructed" rather than "discovered" in the laboratory and that students of science and technology must not assume a ready-made divide between the natural and the social world, and that they must give "agency" not just to humans but also to things.[28] According to Latour, the terminology of discovery will "convey the misleading impression that the presence of certain objects was a pre-given and that such objects merely awaited the timely revelation of their existence by scientists."[29] He also rejects the distinction between 'nature' and 'society'; instead, he maintains that our world is filled with "hybrids", "quasi-objects" and "networks", that is, with entities that cannot be clearly classified as either natural or social. The AIDS virus, for instance, "takes you from sex to the unconscious, then to Africa, tissue cultures, DNA and San Francisco"[30]. Natural entities have "historicity" just as we do, and this is equally true of scientific experiments which should be seen as "events", for instance, once Pasteur experimented on lactic acid ferment, and the Academy accepted his results, the identity of the ferment, Pasteur and the Academy, changed forever: So "we should be able to say that not only the microbes-for-us-humans changed in the 1850's, but also the microbes-for-themselves. Their encounter with Pasteur changed them as well"[31]. And adds: "We do not wish to say that facts do not exist nor that there is no such thing as reality. […] Our point is that 'out-there-ness' is the *consequence* of scientific work rather than its *cause*."[32]

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26 Mills 1998, p. 48, quoted from Mallon 2007.
27 Knorr-Cetina 1993, p. 557.
28 See Latour 1979, 1993, 1999.
29 Latour 1979, pp. 128–9.
30 Latour 1993, p. 2.
31 Latour 1999, p. 146.
32 Latour 1979, p. 182.

This brand of social constructionism is motivated by the famous Quine/Duhem underdetermination thesis, to the effect that the available empirical evidence is not sufficient for determining the truth or even the probability of a scientific theory. Andrew Pickering, for instance, argues that since "choice of a theory is underdetermined by any finite set of data […] it is always possible to invent an unlimited set of theories […] capable of explaining a given set of facts"[33]. This is where the scientists' judgments, as individuals and groups, make a decisive contribution to theory choice. The underlying thought is that scientific method, by itself, is not sufficient to determine theory choice. Scientists are obliged to rely on their judgments and such judgements are inevitably coloured by social, historical and personal conditions, as well as by the prevailing cultural norms and values. The thesis of underdetermination points to a logical gap between theory and evidence, the social constructionists, claim that this gap is often filled by values as well as economic and political motives and interests.

One line of argument against underdetermination and its use (or overuse?) in justifying social constructionism has been proposed by Paul Boghossian. He asks:

> Is it really true that we could never have more reason to revise one of our theories rather than another in response to recalcitrant experience? Consider Duhem's example of an astronomer peering through his telescope at the heavens and being surprised at what he finds there, perhaps a hitherto undetected star in a galaxy he has been charting. Upon this discovery, according to Duhem, the astronomer may revise his theory of the heavens or he may revise his theory of how the telescope works. And rational principles of belief fixation do not tell him which to do. The idea, however, that in peering at the heavens through a telescope we are testing our theory of the telescope *just as much* as we are testing our astronomical views is absurd. The theory of the telescope has been established by numerous terrestrial experiments and fits in with an enormous number of other things that we know about lenses, light and mirrors. It is simply not plausible that, in coming across an unexpected observation of the heavens, a rational response might be to revise what we know about telescopes! The point is not that we might *never* have occasion to revise our theory of telescopes; one can certainly imagine circumstances under which that is precisely what would be called for. The point is that not *every* circumstance in which something about telescopes is presupposed is a circumstance in which our theory of telescopes is being tested, and so the conclusion that rational considerations alone cannot decide how to respond to recalcitrant experience is blocked.[34]

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33 Pickering 1984, pp. 5–6.
34 Boghossian 2001, pp. 8–9.

Boghossian's rejection of the consequences of the indeterminacy argument could sound hollow to the constructionists. They would readily admit that, as a matter of current practice, Boghossian is right to claim that that 'not *every* circumstance in which something about telescopes is presupposed is a circumstance in which our theory of telescopes is being tested' but this reluctance to call into question the prevailing theoretical presuppositions is exactly the point that the constructionists wish to highlight. Our blindness to possible shortcomings in our cherished view is a symptom and not an excuse for our unwillingness to question them.

It is this third and strongest form of social constructionism that most frequently incurs the charge of relativism and is the target of anti-relativists such as Boghossian and Sokal. What is not quite clear, however, is which of the many doctrines falling under the title 'relativism' should be identified with social constructionism and why.

As Ian Hacking has pointed out, one main point of claiming X is a construction, is to claim 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"[35]. In effect, the social constructionists are claiming that a certain category of objects, theories or maybe even 'facts' are not 'inevitable'. And the idea that scientific theories as social constructions are not 'natural' or 'inevitable' became central to the so called "science wars" of the 1990s. The question, however, is how to understand this notion of evitability.

There are two guiding ideas behind this evitability thesis, firstly, as Ron Mallon puts it, the thought that theories might have been different had human cultures or decisions been different and secondly, and quite crucially, that what these theories are has as much to do with social forces, power structures, economic interests as with how things are at the level of brute facts postulated by realists. More generally, social constructivists understand science as determined by the specific, historically contingent interests and goals of the communities in which it is undertaken. After all, most philosophers, sociologists and biologists nowadays accept that race is more of a cultural construct than a natural kind. Why should this not prove to be the case for other 'natural kinds'? So, a second common feature of social constructionism is the emphasis placed on phenomena

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35   Hacking 1999, p. 6.

that are contingent upon human culture and human decisions. However, are these theses sufficient for establishing the frequently made claim that social constructionism is a relativistic doctrine? The answer would of course depend on what we mean by 'relativism'. Relativism, like constructionism, is a very broad church and the exact relativistic claims embodied within or implied by social constructionism are far from obvious.

Relativism is frequently offered as a resolution to the problem of contested and irresolvable claims to truth, knowledge and judgements of value. Faced with incompatible beliefs and norms, held with equal conviction, and in the absence of an overriding independent justificatory framework, we are pushed to the two extremes of scepticism (the Pyrrhonian option) or relativism (the Protagorean option). To put it slightly differently, presented with the contested pair of beliefs P and ¬P, the sceptic abandons all claims to knowledge, while the relativist accepts the truth of both by making them context-dependent. Relativism is variously expressed as an epistemic, quasi-logical or semantic doctrine. We will look at each of these doctrines in turn.

Relativism I. The epistemic thesis

Relativism is frequently expressed as a thesis about the status of our knowledge claims and our attempts at justifying them. Paul Boghossian, for instance, defines it in terms of a "doctrine of equal validity", where "there are many radically different, yet, 'equally valid' ways of knowing the world, with science just one of them"[36]. According to Boghossian, constructivists call into question objectivist and realist conceptions of knowledge through the following interconnected theses, any one of which would render *Equal Validity* plausible:

(1) "The world which we seek to understand and know about is not what it is independently of us and our social context; rather, all facts are socially constructed in a way that reflects our contingent needs and interests" (*Constructivism about Facts*),

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36 Boghossian 2006a, p. 2.

(2) "Facts of the form – information E justifies belief B – are not what they are independently of us and our social context; rather, all such facts are constructed in a way that reflects our contingent needs and interests" (*Constructivism about Justification*),

(3) "It is never possible to explain why we believe what we believe solely on the basis of our exposure to the relevant evidence; our contingent needs and interests must also be invoked" (*Constructivism about Rational Explanation*).[37]

Boghossian, on this occasion, runs a variety of relativist theses together – constructionism about facts, constructionism about beliefs and the contextual character of justification and brings them all under the umbrella of the equal validity view. Nevertheless, the passage still captures an essential feature of the epistemic form of relativism: epistemic relativists call into question the very possibility of unique, context independent and objective epistemic access to the world.

Relativism II. The quasi-logical thesis

As we saw above, relativism, at least since Protagoras, has been a reaction to the phenomenon of disagreement in our judgements. Faced with two equally plausible beliefs A and non-A and no decision procedures for choosing between them, we can either take the extreme option of dialetheism and embrace the contradiction, $A \& \neg A$, or suspend belief on both options, as the Pyrrhonian sceptics recommended, or reconstruct the clash in such a way that would remove the possibility of a straightforward contradiction. Attribution of faultless disagreement to the disputants is in line with this second option.[38] A and B faultlessly disagree with each other when (1) A states P and B states its contradictory non-P, and (2) to the best of our judgement neither A nor B has made an incorrect statement.[39] One way of presenting cases of faultless disagreement is to adopt relativism about truth. A number of philosophers in recent years have argued that the truth of a proposition is relative to a standard of assessment and that different standards of assessment may assign different

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37 Boghossian 2006a, pp. 22–3.
38 See e.g. Wright 2006.
39 See Kölbel 2003, Wright 2006.

truth-values to the same proposition. I call this approach 'quasi-logical' because relativism is offered to resolve or dissolve the apparent conflict between seemingly contradictory beliefs or assertions.[40]

Relativism III: The Semantic Thesis

Relativism can also be construed as a claim about the semantics of certain classes of assertions. Replacement relativism, formulated by Gilbert Harman is a well-known version of this approach. The claim is that sentences that may appear to have a *monadic* truth property, such as 'the earth moves', once analysed correctly, could come to be seen as expressing relational truths of the form *x moves relative to frame of reference F*. As in cases of faultless disagreement, the rationale behind the move is to obviate the threat of a blatant contradiction by showing that the seemingly contradictory pairs of proposition, A and non-A, actually are not in logical conflict with each other. The strategy is to *replace* the non-relativised sentences with relativised ones, and to reinterpret monadic-seeming predicates, such as 'is true', with dyadic or even triadic ones such as 'true according to perspective F'. Boghossian formulates the template of replacement relativism as follows:

Relativism about a monadic property P is the view that:

(A) "x is P" expresses the proposition x is P which is true if and only if x has the monadic property expressed by "P".
(B) Because nothing has (or can have) the property P, all such utterances are condemned to untruth.
(C) The closest truths in the vicinity are the related relational truths of the form:
x is P relative to F
where "F" names some appropriate parameter.

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40   Rosenkranz, for instance formulates the view this way: "P may be true relative to A's perspective while ~P is true relative to B's perspective, even though P & ~P is not true relative to any perspective. Once truth is relativized to perspectives in this way, one cannot simply infer from the fact that P and ~P cannot both be true, that A and B cannot both assert something true." (Rosenkranz 2008, p. 228).

(D) If our P-utterances are to have any prospect of being true, we
    should not make judgements of the form:
    x is P
    but only those of the form:
    x is P relative to F.[41]

Which, if any, of the templates 1–3 for formulating relativism can be
used to establish the relativistic credentials of strong social construction-
ism? I'll look at them in reverse order.

The social constructionists' claims could be seen as a species of relativ-
ism (III), if the social constructionism entailed the replacement of propo-
sitions expressing non-relational truths with those expressing relational
ones. It would be useful to narrow down our discussion to one specific
example, which could be used as a test case. Bruno Latour's infamous
example of tuberculosis gives us a useful statement of a specific construc-
tionist claim.

Latour, as we saw, had argued that the attribution of tuberculosis and
Koch's bacillus to Ramses II is as anachronistic as claiming that his death
was caused by a Marxist upheaval, or a machine gun, or a Wall Street
crash[42] because 'x died of tuberculosis' (T) is true or false only within the
framework of the scientific discourse where tuberculosis has an estab-
lished role. Latour's claim may seem like a prime candidate for relativistic
interpretation if we take it to imply that the truth or falsity of (T) depends
on and hence is relative to a particular framework. Could we use 'replace-
ment relativism' to give a correct analysis of this claim?

However, as I understand Latour's claim, if I understand it, it is that
(T) is false, or at best indeterminate depending on how we parse out the
term 'anachronistic', because the sentence 'x died of tuberculosis' gets
its meaning, and hence its truth value, within a conceptual framework
where the terms 'tuberculosis' and 'Koch's bacillus' have a role to play and
false (or indeterminate) otherwise. Such a conceptual framework was not
applicable prior to the Nineteenth Century and therefore (T) is false (or
indeterminate). The closest truth in the vicinity of (T) is not so much a
relational or dyadic truth but one that construes tuberculosis as an arte-

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fact that came into existence at a specific time because of the actions of a group of scientists. Truth remains a monadic property but its conditions of application changes to something like

> Tuberculosis came into existence, in part, through the actions of Koch.
> Ramses' death predates these actions.
> Therefore, Tuberculosis could not have been the cause of Ramses' death.

Understood in this sense, Latour can be accused of profound errors about the role of scientific discoveries and the meaning of truth evaluable sentences, but he is not making a relativistic claim about truth.

Similar considerations apply to the template used to express relativism (II). Could we construct Latour's claim as an instance of faultless disagreement? I think, once again, the answer has to be in the negative. To see this we need to take a step back and ask: What is it that the strong social constructionists argue for? There seem to be three key points involved in Latour's version of constructionism:

1. The so-called 'facts' are not inevitable
2. Facts are not different from artefacts
3. Social, political and economic interests play a major role in the construction of facts.

1–3 are open to debate on a variety of grounds but do not necessarily lead to disagreements that have even the appearance of faultlessness. Consider once again Latour's claim that 'Ramses II died of tuberculosis' is not true. The relativist would need to argue that 'Ramses II died of tuberculosis' is true at the context of utterance of those living after 19th century and false before that. Although this interpretation may seem to give a prima facie plausible explanation of the alleged relativism, it does not seem to fit with what Latour is suggesting. Once again, Latour seems to argue that we have no basis for arguing that Koch's bacteria existed before it was "discovered" and thereby it could not be implicated in Ramses' death. Once again, this is a rather crazy view but not an instance of relativism. The initial instinct that most philosophers would have is to retort,

with some annoyance, that Latour is in grip of a serious confusion and is simply failing to acknowledge the distinction between the natural kind object bacteria which was the cause of Ramses' death and the concept of bacteria that came into use when Koch discovered the organic agent he called a bacterium. But this very distinction is exactly what Latour is rejecting. His position amounts to the denial of the intelligibility of talking about bacteria as a time-less natural kind, for as he we have seen, he does not subscribe to a hard and fast distinction between natural and social kinds, nor to the distinction between what has existence independently of us and that which cannot exist without we-intentionality.

Finally, what of Boghossian's *Equal Validity* version of relativism or relativism (I)? Is social constructionism a form of relativism because of the argument that facts constructed by agents in different social contexts should be given equal credibility? Boghossian certainly thinks so. He calls the thesis of equal validity "radical and counter-intuitive" because it denies *fact-objectivity* or the common sense idea that with respect to factual questions, "there is a way things are that is independent of us and our beliefs about it."[43] According to Boghossian, in both scientific and non-scientific enquiries we privilege and defer to a "variety of techniques and methods – observation, logic, inference to the best explanation and so forth, but not tea-leaf reading or crystal ball gazing"[44]. We take these methods to be the only legitimate ways of forming rational beliefs and don't give equal credence to those methods which we think acquire their inspiration from superstition. Although, like Boghossian, I subscribe to the universality as well as the essential superiority of the rational methods of enquiry, I believe that his argument in this particular case begs the question against the strong social constructionists because the notions of objectivity and mind independence are in face the key contested ideas of this debate and therefore cannot be presupposed in establishing the incoherence of relativism or constructivism. But it is not the aim of this paper to defend the equal validity claim, which, for different reasons than Boghossian's, I too consider intellectually bankrupt. Rather, the aim is to see if we can find a match between social constructionism and any one of the more prominent iterations of relativism. The prob-

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43   Boghossian 2006 a, p. 3.
44   Boghossian 2006 a, p. 4.

lem is that Boghossian's claim regarding the relativistic implications of social constructionism is far from obvious. Latour, once again used as the mouth-piece of radical constructionism, in effect, proposes a revision of the very presuppositions of science rather than attempting to relativise its truth. This revisionary position, however, does not accord equal validity to the realist and constructionist conceptions of science, rather, it denies the legitimacy of the sort of objectivist view that Boghossian defends; what Latour is trying to show, in his own words, is the "lack of scientific certainty inherent in the construction of facts. […] I intended to *emancipate* the public from a prematurely naturalized objectified fact." This emancipatory act, however, is presented as an absolute claim about science derived from empirical data. Latour grounds the constructionist thesis on observations of what happens in a laboratory and presents it as a corrective measure to what he sees as erroneous preconceptions about what scientists actually do and not as a claim about the equal validity of the objectivist and constructionist methodologies.

But maybe Boghossian has a different argument in mind and strong social constructivism, if not exactly a form of relativism, should be seen as conducive to relativism in a different sense. It is clear that the mere fact that an object is socially constructed does not render our knowledge of or beliefs about it in any sense relative. To see this, compare the study of a socially constructed bacterium to the study of objects such as stamps, which uncontroversially, owe their existence to human intentions and particular social structures (including the existence of a mail service). The 'science' of philately, which involves not merely the act of collecting stamps but actually making them objects of rigorous investigation, is not seen to give us relativised claims to knowledge merely because the objects of its investigation are socially constructed. In the same way, even if we accept that bacteria are social constructs, this would not turn a scientific investigation of them into a relativistic enterprise. Thus, something more than the mere claim that so-called 'natural kinds' are socially constructed is needed for establishing relativism or equal validity. I think the following reconstruction of the constructivist argument shows how relativism could come into the picture.

(a) Scientific activities, including theory construction, laboratory experimentation and the development of a referential apparatus for talking about theoretical entities are all, at least in part, products of social interactions and are imbued with social norms.

(b) The objects that scientists study are the products of these socially informed norm governed theoretical frameworks.

(c) Such norms can vary between different social and historical settings and hence what they produce, so called scientific facts, are relative to their social and institutional settings.

Understood in the above sense, social constructivism could be seen as making a claim of double dependency. First it embeds the theoretical and practical activities of the scientists within a potentially changing context of social norms and actions and then claims that the objects of science are produced, rather than discovered, by these activities. What is being relativised here then is not so much the constructed objects but the theories that underpin them. The crucial relativistic move here occurs in (c) with the claim that the norms used by scientists vary across different social and institutional settings. The claim is reminiscent of a famous statement by Barry Barnes and David Bloor, targeted by many anti-relativists, including Boghossian, "there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such"[45]. Boghossian calls this the cultural construction of reason and its relativisation, but the use of the term 'construction' in this context seems unwarranted and even misleading. To claim that standards of good or bad reasoning vary across different social settings and contexts is integral to many forms of relativism but is not necessarily a constructivist move. For constructivism to be relativistic in an interesting sense it should be distinguishable from the type of relativism that cultural anthropologists such as Edward Westermarck have been offering since the beginning of the early 20th century. In other words, the thesis should be distinguishable from the standard relativistic claim that criteria of rationality or standards of reasoning vary with social and cultural

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45   Barnes/Bloor 1982, p. 27.

conditions. Conversely, in order for the charge of relativism levelled at constructionism to be more than mere name calling, then the relativism involved in constructivism should be spelled out more carefully.

I have argued against Sokal, Boghossian and other vocal anti-relativists that the social constructionism, in its various forms, does not fit readily into the models of relativism they have been targeting. It has not been my intention to defend either social constructionism or relativism. Indeed, I reject most versions of both views. Social constructionism about facts is outrageously implausible and to couple it with relativism makes an easy pray of relativistic doctrines. Relativism, I agree with Boghossian, ultimately is an unsustainable philosophical position but we do not need to reduce it to the absurdities of radical constructionism in order to show its failures. What both approaches have in common is their negation of objective and universal standards and norms for establishing the truth, rationality and reasonableness of scientific claims, but this denial of reason, although a consequence of relativism, should not be equated with it, there is more to flight from reason than claims to relativity. Bizarrely, Bruno Latour in recent years has come to express exactly the type of worry I have about the irrationalist consequences of both relativism and some versions of constructionism. So the last word should go to him and his recent recantation of constructionism. His concern grew out of the realization that the postmodernist critics of science are now finding themselves in the company of the very powers they had set out to fight, e.g. right wing politicians trying to deny global warming, as well as mad conspiracy theorists undermining the very idea of science. He now is worried that the real threat is no longer with those who believe in objectivity and facts "but from an excessive *distrust* of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases"[46]. "I am worried", he says,

> to detect, in those mad mixtures of knee-jerk disbelief, punctilious demands for proofs, and free use of powerful explanation from the social neverland many of the weapons of social critique. Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless. In spite of all the deformations, it is easy to recognize, still burnt in the steel, our trade mark[47].

46 Latour 2004, p. 227.
47 Latour 2004, p. 230.

Latour's recantation goes to the heart of the worry I have on giving up the objectivist conceptions of knowledge, truth and justification. Contrary to the arguments made popular by the post-modernists, to give up on reason is to deprive ourselves of the very possibility of effective critical engagement.[48]

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