

Colloquī

January 11, 2019
Volume 03, Number 24



A journal for restless minds

Mind The Construction

Constructing facts to fit

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

Mind The Construction

Constructing facts to fit

Theists and atheists share common habits of the mind along with common disagreement which I warrant will turn any conversation from dullish-boring to avid animation at the mere mention of His Name. And yet, there is reason in their argument, rationality in their debate and conviction in their purpose; neither animus nor hate welcomed to participate in their argument.

The same might be said of philosophers and plumbers, though neither shares much in common except for their rather obnoxious habit of slogging through the muck and mire searching for those hidden flaws that are wont to bugger up reality. Thankfully, there remain those who quite enjoy what would strike

most as unbecoming to their better nature.

Few would dare deny the greatest φιλόσοφος (*philosophos*) to ever live was Aristotle; no doubt he would have readily admitted to an unabashed φιλοσοφία (*philosophia*), which is to say he was a *lover of wisdom* with an *inexhaustible love of wisdom*.

What then is wisdom? Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics*, said wisdom was the understanding of *causes*: knowing *why* things are, not merely knowing *that* things are.



Knowing that I exist, that I am human, that I can walk, talk, and chew gum at the same time is not wisdom, just observable fact. Understanding why I exist, what caused my existence, what is the nature of existence, and why existence is reality and objectively true, now that is Wisdom.

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Classical philosophy thus casts a wide shadow, encompassing the study of *metaphysics* (the nature of reality and being,) *epistemology* (the nature of knowledge, truth, justification, and belief,) *ethics* (concepts of right and wrong, morality,) *aesthetics* (matters of value,) *logic* (laws of truth and validity,) *mathematics* and *science*. It is our search to understand, to know as fully as possible the nature of a thing, be it substantial (an object) or insubstantial (a mind or soul or God,) which thus allows us to come to know the absolute truth of a thing and how it conforms to reality.

Modern philosophy, currently in vogue within the humanities and social science academies, is a convoluted mess of nonsense and contradictions constructed from the thinnest of air; its sole purpose, never stated of course: to forestall the moribund from the inevitability of their own self-inflicted destruction.

That is not to say that such ideas have received no support from analytic philosophers. On the contrary, one could cite a sizeable proportion of that tradition's most prominent philosophers in their defense—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap, Richard Rorty, Thomas Kuhn, Hilary Putnam and Nelson Goodman, just for example. These philosophers in turn could appeal to some important intellectual precedents.

Immanuel Kant famously denied that the world, insofar as we can know it, could be independent of the concepts in terms of which we grasp it. David Hume questioned our right to think that there is some uniquely correct set of epistemic principles that capture what it is for

a belief to be rationally held. And Friedrich Nietzsche can be read as wondering whether we are ever really moved to belief by evidence, as opposed to the various other non-epistemic motives—self-interest or ideology—that could be acting upon us.

But for all their distinguished intellectual pedigree and for all the attention they have received in recent times, it remains fair to say that such anti-objectivist conceptions of truth and rationality are not generally accepted within the mainstream of philosophy departments within the English-speaking world.¹

Contemporary scholars have come to be convinced of a radical and counterintuitive doctrine of “equal validity” which proffers that there are many radically different, yet equally valid ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them. Here is but one example:

As we come to recognize the conventional and artifactual status of our forms of knowing, we put ourselves in a position to realize that it is ourselves and not reality that is responsible for what we know.²

Now, ordinarily, we think that on factual questions, such as who composed the Moonlight Sonata, there are ways to answer independent of our opinion or beliefs—an objective fact, well-known and understood, as in this instance, Ludwig von Beethoven. But, according to the doctrine of “equal validity” there may be many other, radically different yet equally valid answers. After all, Beethoven was deaf and now dead and buried, the dead are incapable of composing, therefore, the composer of the Moonlight Sonata must be Elton John.

According to Boghossian, few notions have achieved greater prominence in the contemporary academy than the notion of social construction. He notes that Ian Hacking in his book, *The Social Construction of What?*, lists over fifty kinds of item that, in addition to facts, knowledge and reality, have been claimed to be socially constructed—including, authorship, brotherhood, the child viewer of television, emotions, homosexual culture, illness, the medicalized immigrant, quarks, urban schooling and Zulu nationalism.

Ordinarily, to say that something is constructed is to say that it was not there simply to be found or discovered, but rather that it was built, brought into being by some person's intentional activity at a given point in time. And to say that it was socially constructed is to add that it was built by a society, by a group of people organized in a particular way, with particular values, interests and needs.

There are three important respects in which a social construction theorist of the kind that we are currently interested in departs from, or adds to, this perfectly ordinary notion of social construction.

First, in the ordinary sense, it is typically things or objects that are constructed, like houses or chairs; but our theorist is interested not so much in the construction of things as in the construction of facts.

Second, our social construction theorist is not interested in cases where, as a matter of contingent fact, some fact is brought into being by the intentional activities of persons, but only in cases where such facts could only have been brought into being in that way.

Finally, a typical social construction

claim will involve not merely the claim that a particular fact was built by a social group, but that it was constructed in a way that reflects their contingent needs and interests, so that had they not had those needs and interests they might well not have constructed that fact. The ordinary notion of a constructed fact is perfectly compatible with the idea that a particular construction was forced, that we had no choice but to construct that fact. According to Kant, for example, the world we experience is constructed by our minds to obey certain fundamental laws, among them the laws of geometry and arithmetic. But Kant didn't think we were free to do otherwise. On the contrary, he thought that any conscious mind was constrained to construct a world which obeys those laws.

The social construction theorist is not typically interested in such mandated constructions. He wants to emphasize the contingency of the facts we have constructed, to show that they needn't have obtained had we chosen otherwise.

In the intended technical sense, then, a fact is socially constructed if and only if it is necessarily true that it could only have obtained through the contingent actions of a social group.

A social construction claim is interesting only insofar as it purports to expose construction where none had been suspected, where something constitutively social had come to masquerade as natural. But that pushes the question back: Why is it of such great interest to expose construction wherever it exists?

According to Hacking, the interest derives from the following simple thought. If some fact belongs to a species of natural fact, then we are simply stuck with facts of that kind. However, if facts of the relevant kind are in fact social constructions,

then they need not have obtained had we not wished them to obtain. Thus, exposure of social construction is potentially liberating: a kind of fact that had come to seem inevitable would have been unmasked (in Hacking's apt term) as a contingent social development.⁴

Now, should your head be spinning like a merry-go-round, I commiserate fully with your dizziness. If it feels as though you are spiraling out of control down the proverbial rabbit hole, know that such feelings strongly suggest that you may still retain much of your sanity. However, I must warn you, it is so much worse and getting worse. There is, once again, some method to my madness and I will, I promise, get to the point shortly. But, first a brief reprieve.

Although there have been many interesting controversies about the notion of knowledge, there is a broad consensus among philosophers, from Aristotle to the present day, on the nature of the relationship between knowledge and the contingent social circumstances in which it is produced. I shall refer to this consensus as the 'classical picture of knowledge.'

According to this picture, there are several respects in which no one should deny that the enterprise of knowledge may exhibit an important social dimension. No one should deny, for example, that knowledge is often produced collaboratively, by members of a social group, or that contingent facts about that group may explain why it shows an interest in certain questions over others. It's an interesting empirical question to what extent sheer curiosity about the truth is simply built into our biological make-up and to what extent it is a product of our social development.

In any case, it is easy to imagine a society that did not care about the ancient past or that did not think it a useful expenditure of its resources to find out about it, given other pressing needs much closer to home.

Similarly, the classical picture does not deny that the members of a knowledge-seeking group may have certain political and social values and that those values may influence how they conduct their work—what observations they make and how well they appraise the evidence that they encounter. It forms no part of the classical conception of knowledge to deny that inquirers may be *biased* by their background values into believing claims for which there is inadequate evidence. So, our interest in certain questions over others and the integrity with which we pursue them—both of these important domains are clearly not independent of the kind of society we are.

The respects in which the classical picture insists on the independence of knowledge from contingent social circumstance have to do, rather, with three different claims.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the classical conception holds that many facts about the world are independent of us, and hence independent of our social values and interests. For example, according to the classical conception, the fact (assuming it to be a fact for the moment) that dinosaurs once roamed the earth is not dependent on us but is, rather, just a natural fact that obtains without any help from us.

The second aspect of the classical conception that's of interest concerns not truth but our justification for believing that something is true. The point is somewhat subtle. We have already seen that, in an important sense, it is not inevitable that we should have shown an

an interest in the ancient past, or that, having shown an interest in it, we should have stumbled across the fossil record that attests to the existence of the dinosaurs. So, neither of those facts is independent of our social make-up.

However, according to the classical picture, what is independent of our social make-up is the fact that the fossil record we have discovered constitutes evidence for the existence of dinosaurs— contributes to making it rational, in other words, to believe in their existence. That we should have discovered the evidence for the dinosaurs may not be independent of our social context; but that it is evidence for that hypothesis is.

The third and final aspect of the classical conception that is of importance to us concerns the role of epistemic reasons in explaining why we believe what we believe. According to the classical picture, our exposure to the evidence for believing that there were dinosaurs can, on occasion, by itself suffice to explain why we believe that there were dinosaurs; we do not always need to invoke other factors, and, in particular, do not need to invoke our contingent social values and interests.⁵

We are thus presented with two very different philosophies: Objectivism (Classical) and Constructivism (post-modern). To summarize:

The Classical Picture of Knowledge:

Objectivism about Facts: The world which we seek to understand and know about is what it is largely independently of us and our beliefs about it. Even if thinking beings had never existed, the world would still have had many of the properties that it currently has.

Objectivism about Justification: Facts of the form—information E justifies

belief B—are society-independent facts. In particular, whether or not some item of information justifies a given belief does not depend on the contingent needs and interests of any community.

Objectivism about Rational Explanation: Under the appropriate circumstances, our exposure to the evidence alone is capable of explaining why we believe what we believe.

Constructivism about Knowledge:

Constructivism about Facts: 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 Justification:

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 Rational Explanation:

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.⁶

Constructivism, especially fact-constructivism, if properly understood, is such a bizarre view that it is difficult to believe anyone would or could actually endorse it, and yet, many do. Proselytes of Constructivism are now everywhere. The product of constructivist indoctrination within the University Humanities and Social Science regimes, the intellectual elite, the academic *wunderkind* of social engineering push “equal validity” nonsense, like dope dealers on the street corner, through an endless array of “studies” (gender, ethnic,

race, LBTQLMNOP, etc.).

Consider for a moment that according to the pushers of fact-constructivism, it is a necessary truth that any fact exists because we humans have constructed it to fit our needs and interests. Your truth, anyone? Facts are facts but if and only if they are what we want them to be. But it gets much worse, “you ain’t seen nuthin’ yet”:

Fact-constructivism would seem to run into an obvious problem. The world did not begin with us humans; many facts about it obtained before we did. How then could we have constructed them? For example, according to our best theory of the world, there were mountains on earth well before there were humans. How, then, could we be said to have constructed the fact that there are mountains on earth?

One famous constructivist, the French sociologist Bruno Latour, seems to have decided to just bite the bullet on this point. When French scientists working on the mummy of Ramses II (who died c. 1213 BC) concluded that Ramses probably died of tuberculosis, Latour denied that this was possible. “How could he pass away due to a bacillus discovered by Robert Koch in 1882?” Latour asked. Latour noted that just as it would be an anachronism to say that Ramses died from machine-gun fire so it would be an anachronism to say that he died of tuberculosis. As he boldly put it: “Before Koch, the bacillus had no real existence.”⁷

As nonsensical as this may be, such madness is captivating to the young impressionable mind. After all, if the professor, whose authority and professional credentials must not be

questioned, says it is true, then it must be true. Four or five years of this swill will turn any mind to mush.

If a student were to ask how facts are constructed, there is a ready answer.

The most important and influential fact-constructivists in recent philosophy have been Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty. If we look at their writings, we see a fairly uniform answer to our question: we construct a fact by accepting a way of talking or thinking which describes that fact. Thus, Goodman, in his book *Ways of Worldmaking*, in a chapter entitled "The Fabrication of Facts," says:

"... we make worlds by making versions ..."

where a "version," on Goodman's view, is in effect a set of descriptions of the world, very broadly understood.

And Rorty writes:

"Take dinosaurs. Once you describe something as a dinosaur, its skin color and sex life are causally independent of your having so described it. But before you describe [something] as a dinosaur, or as anything else, there is no sense to the claim that it is "out there" having properties. ... people like Goodman, Putnam and myself—... think that there is no description-independent way the world is, no way it is under no description ..."

Let us call the view that Goodman and Rorty are gesturing at, the *Description Dependence of Facts*:

Necessarily, all facts are description-dependent: there cannot be a fact of the matter as to how things are with the world independently of our propensity to describe the world as being a certain way. Once we adopt a particular scheme for

describing the world, there then come to be facts about the world.

This thesis is clearly a version of the view that all facts are mind-dependent since it is clearly only minds that are capable of describing the world.

The constructivist literature contains many other more controversial claims of the alleged description-dependence of facts. Michel Foucault, for example, famously argued that prior to the use of the concept *homosexual* to describe certain men there were no homosexuals but only men who preferred to have sex with other men.⁸

Fact-Constructivism is often conflated with *Social Relativity* which posits: which scheme we adopt to describe the world will depend on which scheme we find *useful* to adopt; and which scheme we find useful to adopt will depend on our contingent needs and interests as social beings. For instance, according to Rorty, we accept the descriptions we accept not because they "correspond to the way things are in and of themselves," but because it serves our practical interests to do so. Had we had different practical interests, we might well have come to accept a very different set of descriptions of the world, ones which did not employ concepts with which we currently think.

Class dismissed. I assured you there was method in my madness and reason for going on so long; here then is the explanation.

We, whether consciously or comatose, no longer seek the why, satisfied that things are as we think they ought to be in our self-described universe. We have enslaved reality, conformed it to

our will, and by our will conformed reality to our facts, to our truth.

Objective truth, whenever inconvenient or counter to our needs and interests becomes a lie; immutable facts are self-mutable by reason of equal validity. Every cocoon a perfect reality; a New Eden where nothing is forbidden, good and evil are synonymous and every desire is satisfied. And, the residents of New Eden are gods unto themselves for God is an inconvenient truth and thus adjudged a lie.

It requires little effort to unearth evidence of this alarming trend, just read any newspaper or listen to the pundits masquerading as authorities on every improbable subject. The script is a common one, one that has been followed for many years: independent of actual facts, either ignore the facts as presented and provide a narrative supporting alternative facts, or, excoriate and dismiss the facts while declaring such facts lies, and thus, either implicitly or explicitly establishing the source of the lie a liar.

It is the case, whether politics or religion or everything in between: facts are made to fit the narrative, gently massaged, carefully shaken not stirred. The objective is to move the goalposts and thus avoid the unpleasant task of actually playing the game. Battles neither won nor lost, victory never met, Goliath killed David with a blow that knocked him all the way to kingdom come. Dare deny it at your peril. Everyone knows the Bible is full of lies written to appease the gullible by a well-known fake Divine.

Two decades ago, there was a movie, *The Truman Show*, in which Truman Burbank was unwittingly the star of a hit television show. Unknown to Truman, a corporation had adopted and raised him inside a simulated television show revolving around his life where everyone but himself were actors playing roles of friends and acquaintances.

This seems to me too awful to contemplate but too real to be disbelieved outright. Too many of us believe what we want to believe, believing we understand more than we do, disbelieving what threatens to tear the fabric of our self-defined reality. We believe in ourselves and as Chesterton suggested, such belief is the cause and consequence of our madness.

Those who still hold to some degree of sanity—those who believe in objective truth, true reality, and above all else, Almighty God—should not too quickly dismiss this mad malady for it will not soon fade away. Those who are true believers in this madness are every bit as much convinced they are sane and you and those not believing in themselves are as mad as that madcap hatter appeared to poor Alice. They are immune to reason and inoculated against OTD (Objective Truth Disorder;) intervention and therapy have been found to be largely ineffective.

Once, in a moment of temporary lucidity, while in a rather piquish mood I should admit, while sitting down I wrote this bit of satire (it is germane, I do and must insist):

EXTREME EPIDERMAL TRANSLUCENCY, infrequently diagnosed prior to a mere decade or two ago, has quite virulently infected, or so it would appear, the preponderance of the population and at the current rapid rate of infection threatens to become a global pandemic so pervasive and widespread that within virtually no time at all is expected to claim more victims than that of the Black Plague, the Third Pandemic, the Plague of Justinian, the Great Plague of London, the American Plagues of the 16th Century, the Great Plague of Milan, the Plague of Athens, the Antonine Plague, the Great Plague of Marseille, and the Moscow Plague combined, so reported the International Office Blaming Just Every Cottonpicking Thing (IOBJECT) in today's totally expected, completely undocumented and really unimportant pre-shredded report.

A nondescript, completely forgettable, inoffensive, generic spokesperson reported that everyone should be assured that absolutely no one had actually written a single word in the report and thus it was estimated that at a minimum four trillion trees had been saved in the process of compiling the report which the spokesperson insisted had been read by no one at all, thus preventing further outbreaks of Extreme Epidermal Translucency or EET, just in case you had difficulty

properly enunciating more than two syllables.

The nondescript, completely forgettable, inoffensive, generic spokesperson went on to report that symptoms for EET were typically Facial Redness & Extreme Temper (FRET,) immediately followed by Brash Angry Raving Fury (BARF,) Complete Lapse Of Decorum (CLOD,) and Frequent Outbursts Of Lunacy (FOOL). The IOBJECT spokesperson refused to respond to any questions, provided no further information, either written or verbal, and failed to produce any of the purported four trillion pages of



exhaustive documentation supporting these alarming claims which the IOBJECT spokesperson assured the lone reporter present at the unscheduled and unannounced news conference never existed as it would have been a complete waste of time and a abhorrent misuse of

rapidly depleting resources to collect, collate, staple, slice, dice, and then wad into giant paper wads.

As inexplicably expected, immediately upon release of the report an equally nondescript, completely forgettable, inoffensive, generic spokesperson for Universal Society of Total Idiots Counting Kooties (USTINK) countered by saying that USTINK objected to IOBJECT's report calling it a total fabrication and misrepresentation

of the facts not in evidence which no one had a clue if there were in fact any facts at all and that attorneys for USTINK would be asking the court to issue an immediate injunction effectively barring IOBJECT from continuing to claim that they had single-handedly saved the lives of six-quadrillion tree toads. When last seen, both nondescript, completely forgettable, inoffensive, generic spokespersons were observed sticking their tongues out at each other and uttering nah nah nah nah USTINK! IOBJECT! No USTINK! IOBJECT!

Public reaction to this totally expected turn of events was as expected. Those who objected to IOBJECT were completely and utterly pessimistic. As one IOBJECTor noted, "I've been sick of these zombies for years and do you think they care? Their report ain't worth the paper it's written on, that is if they had actually written anything!" Another person who appeared to have one of the worst cases of Extreme Epidermal Translucency this reporter has ever encountered literally disappeared in an extreme fit of virulent apoplexy. It was as if suddenly there was an extremely loud noise coming from absolutely no visible source, accompanied by a rather malicious odor. It was truly amazing and quite perplexing.

Public reaction from the other side of the road was extremely objectionable. One witness stated that it was absolutely odoriferous what USTINK was saying about IOBJECT's spurious report. "Look, every time a new unfounded, fallacious report appears, those USTINKers throw their slime

and make up insanely accurate claims against IOBJECT. I mean let's face it, nobody can get away with even a little bald faced prevarication or two anymore. Like where's the harm in that? I think all those USTINKers are bigots and...dude they're ugly and stinky? Somebody needs to go soak their head for darn sake!"

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Disclaimer: Anyone who believes they have been harmed, flamed, inflamed, disrespected, insulted, slandered, libeled, judged, misjudged, mischaracterized, denigrated, slighted, victimized, put-down, slammed, mistreated, maltreated, injured, scarred, ignored, deplored, floored, dissed, bothered, upended, beaten, sneered, ogled, leered, snarled, gnarled, bitten, slapped, hit, belittled, or burned...please, I say this in the most genteel, kindest way possible, really: have a nice day.

What you think of me is none of my business so let's keep it that way. Help stamp out Extreme Epidermal Translucency before it spreads any further. All we have to do is show a little love.

That's all.

Really, pinky swear!

1. Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2006) 7-8.
2. See Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
3. See Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1-2.
4. Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 17-18.
5. Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 19-20
6. Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 21-22
7. Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 26
8. Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 27-28

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

For those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

BOOKS

Thoughtful Theism

Fr. Andrew Younan

Emmaus Road Publishing
2017, 200 pages.

To Change the Church

Ross Gregory Douthat

Simon & Schuster
2018, 256 pages.

Mere Christianity

C. S. Lewis

C. S. Lewis Pte. Ltd.
1952, 228 pages.

PERIODICALS

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Ten Issues per year.

www.firstthings.com

Touchstone

A Journal of Mere Christianity

Editor: James M. Kushiner

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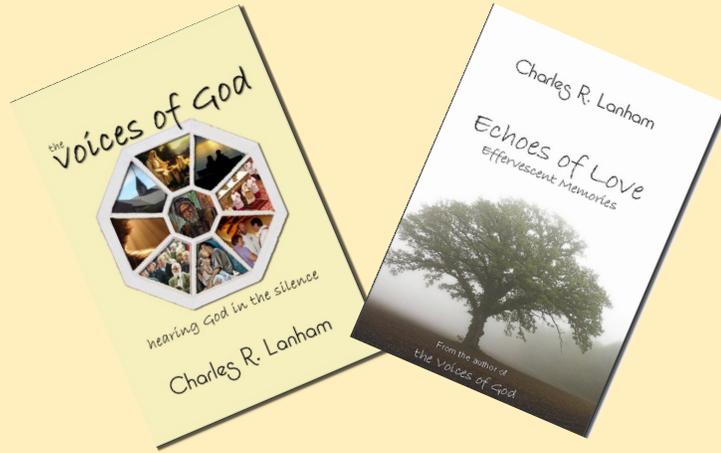
Catholic Answers Magazine

Share the Faith, Defend the Faith

Editor: Tim Ryland

Bi-Monthly.

www.catholic.com



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Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

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Deacon's Corner Publishing

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