



The Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society  
in cooperation with Central European University  
and with the support of  
the Federal Government of Lower Austria, section Science and Research,  
and the municipalities of Kirchberg, Otterthal, and Trattenbach  
is pleased to present the

**45th International Wittgenstein Symposium**  
August 11–17, 2024

# FACETS OF REALITY

## CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

Organised by  
Asya Passinsky (Vienna), Julio De Rizzo (Vienna)  
& Benjamin Schnieder (Vienna)

**BEITRÄGE**  
CONTRIBUTIONS

45. Internationales Wittgenstein Symposium  
Kirchberg am Wechsel 2024

45

WISSENSCHAFT · FORSCHUNG  
NIEDERÖSTERREICH



# **FACETTEN DER WIRKLICHKEIT**

## FACETS OF REALITY

**Beiträge der Österreichischen Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft**

Contributions of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society

**Band XXX**  
Volume XXX

# **FACETTEN DER WIRKLICHKEIT – ZEITGENÖSSISCHE DEBATTEN**

Beiträge des 45. Internationalen Wittgenstein Symposiums  
11. – 17. August 2024  
Kirchberg am Wechsel

**Band XXX**

## **Herausgeber**

Yannic Kappes  
Asya Passinsky  
Julio De Rizzo  
Benjamin Schnieder

in Zusammenarbeit mit Joseph Wang-Kathrein

Die Herausgeber danken Denis Kazankov und Martyna Meyer  
für ihre große Hilfe bei der Vorbereitung dieses Bandes.

Produziert mit Unterstützung der Abteilung  
Wissenschaft und Forschung (K3)  
des Amtes der NÖ Landesregierung

WISSENSCHAFT • FORSCHUNG  
NIEDERÖSTERREICH 

**Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2024**

**Österreichische Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft**

# **FACETS OF REALITY – CONTEMPORARY DEBATES**

Contributions of the 45th International Wittgenstein Symposium  
August 11 – 17, 2024  
Kirchberg am Wechsel

**Volume XXX**

## **Editors**

Yannic Kappes  
Asya Passinsky  
Julio De Rizzo  
Benjamin Schnieder

in cooperation with Joseph Wang-Kathrein

The editors would like to thank Denis Kazankov and Martyna Meyer  
for their substantial help with the preparation of this volume.

Produced with the support of the  
Department for Science and Research (K3)  
of the Province of Lower Austria

WISSENSCHAFT • FORSCHUNG  
NIEDERÖSTERREICH 

Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2024

Österreichische Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft

**Verleger** | Publisher

**Österreichische Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft**

Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society

Markt 63, A-2880 Kirchberg am Wechsel  
Österreich/Austria

**[www.alws.at](http://www.alws.at)**

**Vorstand der ÖLWG** | Executive Committee of the ALWS

Christian Kanzian (Präsident der ÖLWG)  
Elisabeth Nemeth (Vizepräsidentin der ÖLWG)  
Peter Kampits (Vizepräsident der ÖLWG)  
David Wagner (Geschäftsführer der ÖLWG)  
Marian David  
Elisabeth Ehrenhöfer  
Christoph Limbeck-Lilienau  
Josef Mitterer  
Volker Munz  
Alois Pichler  
Klaus Puhl  
Friedrich Stadler  
Paul Weingartner

ISSN 1022-3398 | ISBN 978-3-9505512-2-8

Refereed Periodical

All Rights Reserved

Copyright 2024 by the Authors

Copyright will remain with the author, rights to use with the society. No part of the material may be reproduced or utilised in any form or by any means, electronically or mechanically, including photocopying, recording, informational storage, and retrieval systems without permission from the society.

**Die Redaktion dankt allen Gutachtern für ihre äußerst hilfreichen Rezensionen.**

The editors are grateful to all referees for their most helpful reviews.

**Die Beiträge und das Abstracts-Heft wurden mit Unterstützung einer von Joseph Wang-Kathrein, Universität Innsbruck, erarbeiteten Datenbank erstellt. Kontakt: [joseph.wang@uibk.ac.at](mailto:joseph.wang@uibk.ac.at)**

The *Contributions* and the booklet of *Abstracts* were compiled with the support of a database developed by Joseph Wang-Kathrein, University of Innsbruck. Contact: [joseph.wang@uibk.ac.at](mailto:joseph.wang@uibk.ac.at)

## **Inhalt / Contents**

<b>The Right Language for Real Metaphysics</b>	
Siantonas Alec	11
<b>Degrees of Reality</b>	
Damian Aleksiev	20
<b>Is There a Dispositional Ground for the Contingency of Origin?</b>	
Jonas Amar	31
<b>Being Queer</b>	
Matthew Andler	41
<b>How Hegel brought Brandom back to Wittgenstein</b>	
Pavel Arazim	43
<b>“Will the Sun Rise Tomorrow?” Wittgenstein on Scepticism and Hinge Propositions</b>	
Lorenzo Barba	52
<b>Inside and Outside the Boundaries: Probability in Wittgenstein’s <i>Tractatus</i></b>	
Matteo Bizzarri	62
<b>Toward a Dissolution of the Color-Exclusion “Problem”</b>	
Edgar Boedeker	74
<b>Being Pleonastic</b>	
Paolo Bonardi	86
<b>Are Artificial Neurons Neurons?</b>	
Johannes Brinz	98
<b>Wittgenstein’s <i>Tractatus</i>: A Transcendental Account</b>	
Cecilia Brotzu	108
<b>An Argument for Modal Realism</b>	
David Builes	116
<b>Connecting Language-Games: Diamond on Truth, Realism and The World</b>	
Barnaby Burleigh	118
<b>Logic as Metaphysics in Wittgenstein</b>	
Bangrui Chen	127
<b>Sortal Terms and the Puzzle of Coincidence</b>	
Zhengguan Chen	137
<b>The Modal Argument for the Anchoring Model in Social Metaphysics</b>	
Samuele Chilovi	147
<b>Translating the <i>Tractatus</i> and Tractarian Ethics</b>	
Jeffrey Patrick Colgan	149

<b>Vaidya's Method of Variation in Imagination Revisited</b>	
Violeta Conde & Concha Martínez-Vidal	160
<b>Levels of Abstraction As Family Resemblances From the Classical to the Quantum Mechanical Representation of Reality</b>	
Niccolò Covoni & Silvano Zipoli Caiani	168
<b>A Bipartite Reading of the Private Language Argument of Philosophical Investigations</b>	
Haiqiang Dai	178
<b>Ontology Reconstructed: Another Way of Being Neo-Carnapian</b>	
Caterina Del Sordo	185
<b>The Geach/Black Wittgensteined</b>	
Dušan Dožudić	196
<b>Luck, Disappearing Agents and Physicalism</b>	
Yaren Duvarci	208
<b>How Neo-Meinongians Take Ontological Questions About Fictional Entities Easy</b>	
Manuel Englert	216
<b>Imaginary Anthropologies. On Wittgenstein's Last Writings and Epistemic Relativism</b>	
Claudio Fabbroni	224
<b>Alexithymia and Neurodivergence: A Wittgensteinian Deconstruction</b>	
Mélissa Fox-Muraton	234
<b>Organic and Artificial Intelligence: Wittgenstein's Cultural Pessimism and Modern AI</b>	
Craig Frayne	243
<b>Are Social Constructs Fictions? Odd Terminology in Harari's <i>Sapiens</i></b>	
Martin F. Fricke	251
<b>On Raising My Arm Automatically and Similar Actions: Implications of Automaticity for Free Agency</b>	
Christina Fritz	256
<b>The Regress of Necessity and Its Structure</b>	
Yaokun Fu	266
<b>Two Concepts of Possibility in <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i></b>	
Cloris C. Gao	275
<b>Translating Wittgenstein's <i>Tractatus</i> Into RDF</b>	
Jakub Gomułka	283
<b>Fundamentality, Existence, Totality: On Three Notions of Reality and the Landscape of Metaphysics</b>	
Dustin Gooßens	292

## Are Social Constructs Fictions? Odd Terminology in Harari's *Sapiens*

Martin F. Fricke (Mexico City, Mexico)

### Abstract

In his *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Harari claims that humans are able to cooperate in large numbers because they share common beliefs in fictions or “things that do not exist at all”. Examples of these fictions are religious doctrines, nations, laws, justice and money. In my paper, I argue that Harari is right to point out the importance of social constructs, entities that depend for their existence on the beliefs of the members of a society, for cooperation. But he is wrong to characterise social constructs as fictions or imagined realities. Doing so makes it difficult to distinguish between real social constructs and social constructs that are fictitious or merely imagined. Harari tries to remedy this problem calling fictitious social constructs lies; but this suggestion unhelpfully associates mere fictions or imaginings with deceptive intent.

A central claim in Yuval Harari's first bestseller, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2014), is that humans are distinguished from all other animals by their ability to talk about fictions, “things that do not exist at all” (Harari 2014: 27). Harari thinks that this ability is crucial for “large-scale human cooperation” (Harari 2014: 30) of thousands of inhabitants in cities or even hundreds of millions in empires. Such cooperation among large numbers of strangers is possible if they believe in “common myths” (ibid.). What are these myths? Harari mentions belief in religious doctrines, belief in the existence of a nation, of a homeland and a flag and belief in the existence of laws, justice, human rights and money. Shared belief in the value of money, for example, creates trust necessary for strangers to trade with each other. Another example are limited liability companies. They exist only because people believe that they exist, not as physical objects. But despite being only legal fictions, they are important for the functioning of the modern economy.

Yet none of these things exist outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings. (Harari 2014: 31)

What is striking about Harari's claims is not, it seems to me, the suggestion that the cooperation of large numbers of humans depends on certain common beliefs. Rather, what surprises is his claim that these beliefs are beliefs in things *that do not exist at all*; in other words, that they are beliefs in fictions.



While contemporary readers might agree with a certain scepticism about the existence of gods, it seems odd to deny the existence of nations, money, or laws. To say that they do not exist at all or are fictions seems mistaken or, at least, in need of clarification.

Harari provides some clarification of his claim that the entities mentioned in the previous paragraph “do not exist at all”. He seems to mean that they are not physical objects: the limited liability company Peugeot SA, for example, “can’t be pointed at; it is not a physical object. But it exists as a legal entity.” (Harari 2014: 32) Here the idea seems to be that to exist, in a full sense, is to be a physical object that can be pointed at. A physical object could be defined as one that figures in physical theories; or, more traditionally, as an object with spatial location, extension, and solidity (cf. Cassam 1997: 2f.). Either way, nations, money, or laws clearly do not fall under this category and so do not exist in this sense. Nevertheless, Harari seems to admit that they exist in a looser sense, for example as legal entities. Elsewhere, he says that humans live “in a dual reality. On the one hand, the objective reality of rivers, trees and lions; and on the other hand, the imagined reality of gods, nations and corporations.” (Harari 2014: 36) He even recognises the imagined reality to have become “evermore powerful, so that today the very survival of rivers, trees and lions depends on the grace of imagined entities such as the United States and Google.” (Ibid.) It is not clear to me that this position is entirely coherent. If a reality is only imagined (“a figment of our collective imagination” [Harari 2014: 32]) and does not exist at all, how can it be powerful in our true reality? And if this is only metaphorical talk, how is it to be translated into a description of physical reality?

Whatever answers Harari might have in mind to these questions, it seems to me a mistake to characterise the above entities as *fictions*. He says that the objects in question “are known in academic circles as ‘fictions’, ‘social constructs’, or ‘imagined realities’” (Harari 2014: 35). However, while it is true that all three terms are used in academic circles with similar meanings, it seems to me that this is a mistake. We should distinguish social constructs, on the one hand, from fictions and imagined realities, on the other. The reason is that it seems plausible to say that social constructs can be either real or

fictitious; and also that they can be either real or imagined. If we conflate social constructs with fictions and imagined realities, it becomes impossible to make these distinctions with respect to social constructs.

According to some philosophers, elements of social reality exist because and in so far as people believe or accept that they exist. They depend for their existence on people's beliefs (Searle 1995). For instance, a judge is a judge because people accept the laws that define the requirements for becoming a judge and they accept the judge's rulings as valid and only revisable through certain procedures. These elements of social reality are often called social constructs. Thus, social constructs, and social reality in general, are belief-dependent. They do not exist independently of people's beliefs in the way physical objects exist.

Does this mean that social constructs are fictions? It seems to me that it does not; for social constructs can either be real or fictitious. Let's take Harari's example of the limited liability company. Before the legislation was passed which makes it possible to create such companies and before someone took advantage of this legislation and created such a company, they did not exist and were not real. However, some intelligent person might nevertheless have written a fictional account of a society in which it was possible to create a limited liability company and in which people took advantage of this possibility and did create such companies. These would have been fictional limited liability companies, since they would not have existed in the real world, only in fiction. Both a fictional and a real limited liability company are social constructs. They exist only because people believe that they exist. But it seems plausible to say that only one of them is a fiction and only one of them is real. If we insist on calling *all* such companies fictions, we cannot draw this distinction.

Likewise, we might imagine a society in which it is possible to enter a marriage of up to three people of the same or different sexes. Such a marriage would be a social construct, but it would only be an imagined reality, not part of the real world. In the real world, marriage is also a social construct, but – at least in Kirchberg – it involves only two people. The difference between the two cases is that the first type of marriage is an imagined social construct or an imagined reality, while the second is a real social construct. If we characterise *all*

marriages as imagined realities, it becomes impossible to distinguish between the two cases.

So while it might make sense to call at least some of the constituents of the social world social constructs, because unlike physical objects, they are dependent on people's beliefs, it seems to me that we should not call them fictions or imagined realities, because this would make it impossible to distinguish between the real social world and a fictitious or an imagined one.

Harari tries to solve this problem with his terminology by distinguishing between lying and sincere belief: If we talk about what I called a fictitious or an imagined social construct, we are lying, according to Harari. By contrast, talk about what I called real social constructs is based on sincere belief.

An imagined reality is not a lie. [...] Unlike lying, an imagined reality is something that everyone believes in, and as long as this communal belief persists, the imagined reality exerts force in the world. [...] Some sorcerers are charlatans, but most sincerely believe in the existence of gods and demons. Most millionaires sincerely believe in the existence of money and limited liability companies. (Harari 2014: 35)

Is this a reasonable solution to the terminological problem? It is a solution of sorts because at least it allows to distinguish between social constructs that are real and those that are not. Both might be imagined realities or fictions, in Harari's terminology; but the second ones are also lies. However, this is a solution with flaws. First, to say that *all* social constructs are fictions or figments of our imagination suggests that our real social world somehow lacks reality, that it "does not exist at all". This might be a spectacular claim useful for writing a bestseller, but it is also disingenuous if all we want to say is that social constructs depend for their existence on certain shared beliefs and acceptances in a society. Belief-dependent objects are no less real than physical objects. They merely have different persistence conditions.

The second flaw is that this terminology associates what we ordinary call fiction or imaginings with lying. As Harari himself explains, someone who lies lacks sincerity. She tries to *deceive* her listeners. But this is an inadequate characterisation of those who – as we ordinarily would say – write fiction. García Márquez writes about things that do not exist in his novels. But his isn't

to say that he is trying to deceive us. He simply writes fiction, rather than trying to give an objective description of reality. Likewise, it is often a useful exercise to imagine a world that does not (yet) exist. We can try to imagine what it would be like if everyone enjoyed a universal basic income. Would this be a good thing or a bad thing? Such counterfactual reasoning can be seen as a way of discovering what is possible in the real world (Williamson 2007). Yet it seems that Harari would have to say that it is based on lies, on intents of deception. This would seem an odd characterisation of such reasoning, especially given that the only reason he has for making it is his desire to declare that social constructs are merely imagined and somehow lack reality.

To sum up. Harari make the plausible claim that large numbers of humans can only cooperate if they share common beliefs, which help to constitute their social reality. He makes the further claim that the social constructs which depend on these common beliefs are merely fictions or imagined realities and as such “do not exist at all”. Although he qualifies the “not existing at all” claim somewhat, it is at least terminologically awkward to characterise social constructs as fictions or imagined realities, because it makes it difficult to distinguish between social constructs that are real in our social realities and social constructs that are fictitious or merely imagined, such as in counterfactual reasoning. Harari tries to remedy the problem by distinguishing between sincerely believed social constructs and lies about them. But this only creates further problems, as it suggests that social reality does not exist at all and associates what we ordinarily know as fiction and imagining with deceptive lying. We can avoid all these problems by not taking social constructs to be mere fictions or imagined realities.

## References

Cassam, Quassim (1997) *Self and World*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Harari, Yuval Noah (2014) *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind*, London: Penguin Random House.

Searle, John (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality*, London: Penguin Random House.

Williamson, Timothy (2007) *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, Malden, M.A.: Blackwell.