Object Constructivism and Unconstructed Objects

(*Southwest Philosophy Review*, forthcoming)

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The object constructivist thesis that all objects are socially constructed, typically associated with William James and Nelson Goodman, is thought to be obviously false.[1] Ordinarily, to say something is constructed is to say it is brought into being by some intentional activity, and to say something is socially constructed is to say it is constructed by a group of intentional agents with certain values, needs, and interests. Many objects are obviously socially constructed, such as nickels, books, and tables, but object constructivists make the much stronger claim that seemingly natural objects, such as quarks and stars, are also constructed.[2] Object constructivists do not maintain the Berkeleian idealist thesis that objects are non-material collections of ideas, nor do they think all objects are literally crafted and physically placed out in the world. Instead, they believe *something* exists independently of us, and whatever it is gains a determinate structure only in relation to our actions. It has been charged that this position is inconsistent. Paul Boghossian (2006) and Isreal Scheffler (2009), for instance, argue that object constructivism presupposes the existence of at least some unconstructed objects for there to be objects that we can construct, and so the thesis is false.

This paper does not attempt to win over those who are firmly against object constructivism. Nor does it try to develop a convincing argument for the admittedly radical thesis. The aim is instead to begin to develop a constructivist view that can respond to the worry about inconsistency, which seems to attack the heart of the constructivist position. The constructivist response is that on her position whatever exists apart from us cannot be an object, and so the objection is unsound.

The paper is divided into three main parts. The first defines key terms of the debate; the second attempts to illustrate how apparently natural objects are socially constructed; and the third

addresses the objection. I close by commenting on whether constructivism implies that when agents construct "anything goes."

Object Constructivism and Object Objectivism

Let's start by defining the terms of the debate more precisely. In general, *object constructivism* is the thesis that all objects we can grasp in principle, that is, all objects we can possibly encounter in experience, are socially constructed. To say objects are socially constructed is to say the identity conditions of objects are essentially dependent on our intentional activities, which is to say those activities are partly constitutive of the identity of objects.[3] An object is constitutively dependent on our intentional activities if its identity is at least in part constituted by those actions. The kinds of activities important to constructivists are certain kinds of descriptive representations, such as scientific representations, since these explain how objects are constructed.[4] Object constructivism should therefore be understood as the thesis that the identity conditions of all objects that can in principle be encountered in experience are constitutively dependent on certain kinds of descriptive representations. Consider Scrabble jokers, the blank tiles that can be used to represent any letter of the alphabet in Scrabble. On the constructivist's account, if a tile *a* is a Scrabble joker while *b* is not, it is because our actions make it the case that the concept *Scrabble joker* fixes the conditions of identity such that the concept correctly applies to *a* but not *b* – perhaps, for instance, because *b* is not a blank tile, but has the marking 'Z_{10}'.[5]

This example suggests one important way to avoid misunderstanding object constructivism. Constructivism does not hold the idealist position that objects have identity conditions solely in virtue of being *actually* represented. On such a view, if there had been no people there would have been no Scrabble jokers, and, more alarmingly, there would have been no stars or dinosaurs. If there had been no people, then of course there would likely not have been Scrabble jokers, but certainly

there would have been stars and dinosaurs. Constructivism holds that objects gain conditions of identity by virtue of the *possibility* of being represented in some way or another, and *only* denies that objects have some identity conditions regardless of the possibility of being represented.[6] In this sense, constructivists claim that it makes sense to talk about objects we have not encountered. If there had been no people there would still have been stars and dinosaurs; there would still have been things that would be constructed by humans were they around.[7]

We can be more specific about how descriptive representations are supposed to construct objects. Objects are constructed when we form concepts that collect properties under a general designation. The identities of objects are then constituted by our actions in the sense that the set of properties over which our concepts generalize determine the identity conditions of objects. Since properties can also be predicables, we can specify that object constructivism holds that the collection of properties a concept *C* group together determines the application conditions of the property predicated by *C*, and the identity conditions of objects are determined by which collection of properties constitutes the application conditions of the property predicated by *C*. Application conditions are conditions that apply to our concepts, which predicate certain properties, and identity conditions govern the objects (if any) those concepts refer to. Application conditions fix the conditions of identity for anything that meets them.[8] Return to the example about Scrabble jokers. We can now say that if a tile *a* is a Scrabble joker, while *b* is not, it is because we make it the case that the concept *Scrabble joker* fixes the application conditions of the property of being a Scrabble joker such that it correctly applies to *a* but not *b*.

Object objectivism is the thesis that not all objects are socially constructed, or that the identities of at least some objects exist independently of our intentional activities. For the objectivist the conditions of identity of objects exist at least constitutively, and perhaps, but not typically,

conditionally independent of our actions. If an object's identity conditions are conditionally dependent on our actions, then although we must understand what that object is from some standpoint or other determined by our intentional actions, the object's identity is not constituted by those actions.[9] Grasping what objects are stars might require us to be in some cognitive relation to the firmament, for instance, but the objectivist typically claims that that relation does not constitute what objects are stars. Objectivists who maintain that the identity conditions of objects exist both constitutively and conditionally independent of our actions embrace the existence of noumenal objects, or objects that are in principle inaccessible to us, such as Kant's thing in itself.[10] Whether objectivists hold that the identity conditions of objects exist merely constitutively independent of our actions, or both constitutively and conditionally independent, objectivism assumes that objects have some identifying features that in no way depend on our activities, while constructivism denies that objects have such features. This is the fundamental difference between the two theses.

Constructing Objects

To understand how object constructivism applies to what we ordinarily consider natural objects, consider planets.[11] Let α, β, γ… be all the astronomical objects in the universe. Astronomical objects are physical entities, associations, or structures that astronomy takes to be in the universe, such as planets, star clusters, galaxies, and so on. Let A_p be the set comprised of all the planets, and A_1 to A_n be all simple combinatorial sets of astronomical objects (e.g. A_6 might contain α, γ; A_{14} only β). Only one combinatorial set of astronomical objects (e.g. A_{18}) is identical to A_p. Each member of a set instantiates a property that is unique to members of that set, and that property has those members as its extension.

Suppose we want to know whether α is a planet. Only knowing which astronomical objects (α, β, γ…) are members of which sets (A_1 to A_n) will not answer the question. Answering requires knowing which set includes only instances of the property of being a planet and whether α is a member of that set. According to the International Astronomical Union (IAU), α is an instance of the property of being a planet just in case α (i) orbits our Sun, (ii) has sufficient mass for its self-gravity to overcome rigid body forces so that it assumes a hydrostatic equilibrium (nearly round) shape, and (iii) does not have any bodies of comparable size other than its own satellites under its gravitational influence (it has "cleared the neighborhood" around its orbit). The IAU established (iii) after discovering an astronomical object larger than Pluto they did not want to induct into A_p, primarily because doing so required adopting a definition of *planet* based sheerly on size, which, for various reasons, was thought to be inadequate. Accepting the third condition, however, required having to reclassify Pluto from planet to dwarf planet. Pluto shares a substantial portion of its gravitational orbit with large Kuiper belt objects, and so it does not satisfy (iii). Hence Pluto is not a planet.[12]

Pluto's reclassification appears to be the result of a change in theoretical commitments about what constitutes the relevant interpretation of the conditions under which something counts as a planet. The set of conditions that constitute what objects are planets are the conditions relevant to us about what objects are planets. Those conditions form the application conditions of the property of being a planet and thus provide a framework for saying whether or not the term 'planet' applies to certain objects. So α is an instance of the property of being a planet just in case astronomers decide that our concept *planet* refers to something that satisfies (i), (ii) and (iii), only something that satisfies (i), (ii), (iii) is the referent of *planet*, and α satisfies (i), (ii), and (iii). Fixing the representational boundaries of *planet* determines what is a member of A_p, or, for example, that A_{14} but not A_2 will be

identical to A_p. It is not the case that α is or is not a member of the set of all planets absent some criteria for what does and does not satisfy the membership conditions of that set. Without a specific set of conditions forming the application conditions for the property of being a planet, there is no unique set of objects that are only instances of that property. Our activities determine which set (e.g. A_{14} but not A_2) is the extension of that property. The identities planets are constitutively dependent on our intentional activities because our representations determine the application conditions of the property of being a planet.

Presumably, a similarly structured argument can be made for all objects of experience, though we cannot make that case here. For the constructivist there is no ontologically significant difference between the identity conditions of planets, trees, tables, dogs, and so forth. Yet, critics often respond, what about the property of being the object to which we apply the property of being a planet? I now turn to explaining how the constructivist might answer this question.

The Unconstructed Objects Objection

This account has so far granted that astronomical objects (α, β, γ ...) exist apart from our descriptions. One might then reply that while we seem to play an essential role in deciding that the property of being a planet applies to α but not β, the objects to which we ascribe that proper are perfectly mind-independent. Astronomical objects are not constructed. Thus, the example fails to support object constructivism.

The object constructivist claims that what holds for planets also holds for astronomical objects. We construct astronomical objects by organizing features of the world that matter to us about some celestial entities, associations, or structures having the property of being an astronomical object, and the result is that certain types of celestial phenomena are these sorts of objects. Take, for

instance, scattered astronomical objects, such as star clusters. Star clusters are composed of dozens to millions of stars. Determining whether some aggregate of stars is a cluster requires determining what stars, of what kind, distributed over what spatial and temporal intervals, constitutes a cluster. We contribute to determining these boundaries in the same way we do planets. A similar argument can be made about stars. Again, the constructivist argues that there is no ontologically significant difference between planets, star clusters, and stars, and so if those objects are constructed, then so are other objects.

Critics reply that there has to be *something* upon which construction occurs which is itself not constructed. Boghossian writes:

> If our concepts are cutting lines into some basic worldly dough and thus imbuing it with a structure it would not otherwise possess, doesn't there have to be some worldly dough for them to get to work on, and mustn't the basic properties of that dough be determined independently of all this [constructive] activity (2006: 35)?

At some point in organizing reality we must structure something that has some identifying features constitutively independent of our descriptions, and so something must in fact have such features. The worry can also be put as follows: "Whether a feature or predicate of our making is *null or not* is not … dependent on the saying" (Scheffler 2009: 61). We certainly construct predicates, but some of our predicates have content constitutively independent of our descriptions, and so something has some identifying features fully independent of our representational activities. These claims suggest the following argument:

(1) There must be some unconstructed objects for there to be constructed objects.
(2) If so, then object constructivism is false.
(3) So, object constructivism is false.

The second premise is unassailable on the understanding of object constructivism on offer. The first premise is warranted because the basic material that enables agents to construct objects, or the

content that makes some predicates not null, must have conditions of identity fully apart from our descriptions. Whatever it is that has these identity conditions can be considered unconstructed objects. Therefore, object constructivism is false, and object objectivism is true.

The object constructivist would deny the first premise. The position that something has the features it does constitutively divorced from our descriptions does not help to answer questions about what objects exist – and this is the very issue in contention. The claim *that* a predicate is not null, or has content apart from us, says nothing about *what* predicate is not null, or *what* content a predicate has which makes it not null. Moreover, it is in fact *self-defeating* to describe such content, since the description would require some organization of the world in experience, which, according to the constructivist, affects what objects exist Object objectivists cannot describe what has the features it does completely apart from our activities without abandoning their position.

Constructivists can concede the criticism that constructing objects is only possible provided that *something* enables construction. It does not follow from this that what enables construction are objects. With respect to whatever is unconstructed, one can say, at most, "*something* is completely apart from our descriptions," or "*that* is completely apart from our descriptions," which says nothing about what objects there are – unless, implausibly, *being*, or *existence*, has identity conditions.[13] Saying anything more introduces conditions of identity, and so objects. Assuming that something's being an object requires having determinate identity conditions, something unconstructed cannot be an object.

Noumenal Objects

What about noumenal objects? Such objects, which are in principle inaccessible to us, could very well be the best candidates for unconstructed objects. To be sure, the existence of noumenal objects does not directly challenge the thesis of object constructivism, which holds that all objects that are *graspable* are constructed. Nonetheless, the best defense of constructivism should involve an argument against the existence of such objects. Those inclined to defend the thesis that all objects are constructed typically attempt to deny that some objects are unconstructed, no matter their accessibility in experience.

The constructivist might argue that noumenal objects do not exist along the following lines. Something in principle inaccessible to us can be only be a conceptual posit. If so, then at least with respect to noumenal objects, inconceivability is a reasonable test for ontological impossibility. To conceive of something is (at the very least) to understand it as satisfying some description or other. Consequentially, we can have no conception, or only a contradictory one, of something in principle inaccessible. Noumenal objects cannot be conceived, or cannot be conceived without contradiction. So, there is good reason to think noumenal objects do not exist.

Last Remarks

It is important briefly to mention in closing that the constructivist need not be committed to thinking that the process of determining identity conditions is completely arbitrary, or occurs free of all constraints.[14] Object construction should proceed by taking into consideration various limitations, such as the current body of accepted belief, scope, simplicity, coherence, explanatory power, and so forth. Taking account of these factors means that some ways of organizing are better than others. Constructivism only denies that there is a particular, privileged manner in which construction should occur which is guaranteed by some reality that exists independently of our actions. The descriptive

framework we adopt determines which objects are in the world, and whatever is unconstructed is well lost.

Notes

[1] See, e.g., Devitt (2006); Sider (2011): 1-8.
[2] For the former see Pickering (1984); Hacking (1999: 64, 68-70); for the latter see James (1981); Goodman (1978), (1984).
[3] See Goodman (1978), (1984); Schwartz (1986), (2000); Devitt (2006). Notice this is not the claim that our actions *cause* objects to have identity conditions, a view critics often use to dismiss object constructivism (see Boghossian 2006). From now on, I will talk about how *human beings* construct objects, but object constructivism may apply to any advanced cognitive being.
[4] See Goodman (1978: 94); Wolgar (1988: 73); Rorty (1998: 87, 90); Boghossian (2006: 27-28); Haslanger (2003: 310). Goodman (1978) explores construction associated with non-descriptive representation, though I will not discuss that here.
[5] This example is treated at length by Schwartz (1986).
[6] For a good formulation of this point see Kant (1998: A496/B524-A497/B525).
[7] For critical discussion of this aspect of constructivism see Devitt (2006), Busche (2006).
[8] I adopt this loosely from Thomasson (2007).
[9] Cf. Devitt (1997: 15-16): '[An] object has objective existence, in some sense, if it exists and has its nature whatever we believe, think, or can discover: it is independent of the cognitive activities of the mind … It is not *constituted by* our knowledge, by our epistemic values, by our capacity to refer to it, by our imposition of concepts, theories, or languages.'
[10] See Devitt's understanding of 'Fig-Leaf Realism', for instance (1997: 23). Also note that using Kant as an example here assumes the "two-worlds" reading that noumenal reality consists in objects in principle inaccessible to us, rather than an unknowable "aspect," or perspective, of objects within empirical reality.
[11] In what follows I am greatly indebted to Schwartz (1986), (2000).
[12] There is an issue here over whether Pluto has never been a planet or was once and now is not. Generally, realists (e.g. Devitt) assert the former, anti-realists (e.g. James) the latter. The object constructivist view need not take a position on this, since either view is dependent on our fashioning and applying the property planet.
[13] See Wiggins (1980) for a substantial defense of this basic position. Wiggins holds that "behind every true identity there is an identity sentence covered by a substance concept for some particular *kind* of thing" (1980: v). Cf. Devitt: "You do not get a realism [viz., object objectivism] worth fighting for by claiming merely that *something* exists objectively and independently of the mental" (2006: 13, brackets added).
[14] For this worry see Devitt (2006); Wieland (2012).

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