

effective decision-making. These seem to be working well as far as I can tell, but it requires imagination and ingenuity to devise mechanisms which recognize Aborigines' claims over land that is exclusively theirs for settlement, and also recognizes that they have historical title over much broader areas given their originally migratory ways of life.

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Geof Bowker
Howard Sankey

Truth and Reality in Social Constructivism

ABSTRACT: Science cannot be accorded any special place: it is a discursive practice like any other. All scientific work has political, social and theoretical dimensions. This does not invalidate the work of scientists: indeed, scientists have always been able to build useful tools. It does, though, relativize the discourse that scientists produce: their discourse is reflective of the political economy (broadly construed) of their society. Since the name of science is regularly and effectively invoked to demonstrate that the social order is a natural order, this relativization is an urgent political task. Although the need is less urgent, philosophy of science would also benefit from grappling with its own discursive nature. (Geof Bowker)

ABSTRACT: Science has traditionally been seen as the most reliable way of producing objective knowledge of the natural world. This traditional view is reflected in the authority and prestige which science is accorded within modern society. Yet recent work within the history, philosophy and sociology of science has thrown many of the assumptions underlying this view of science into question. A currently popular position within the sociology of science holds that scientific beliefs about the world are culturally relative beliefs on a par with the beliefs produced by any other social group. One version of this position, social constructivism, says that the theories, beliefs and concepts of science are mere constructs produced as the result of a variety of social processes. But the claim that scientific knowledge is socially constructed faces deep epistemological and metaphysical difficulties which require careful philosophical analysis. (Howard Sankey)

HS: You describe yourself as a sociologist of scientific knowledge. As someone who works in the philosophy of science, I have rather serious misgivings about much of the work that is being done in your area. I find it particularly difficult, for example, to understand the bearing of the sociology of scientific knowledge upon some basic issues of metaphysics and epistemology.

GB: I think one of the reasons for difficulty in understanding sociological thinking on these issues is that there is often an institutional and disciplinary divide between sociologists and philosophers. Perhaps we could hold a dialogue aimed at working through some of the metaphysical and epistemological issues involved in my tradition. What, as a philosopher, seem to you to be the most problematic claims of that tradition?

HS: Sociologists of scientific knowledge frequently say that science is socially determined or that the reality disclosed by scientific investigation is a social construction. Neither claim is particularly clear. The first appears to be a causal thesis but it is not clear how strong a thesis is intended. The second, on the other hand, suggests some kind of idealist metaphysics, since it makes reality depend on people, and deprives it of mind-independent existence.

GB: I agree that the statement 'Science is socially determined' is causally problematic. I am much happier with the starting position that the reality determined by science is a social construction. Now, you tie in this position with an idealist metaphysics. But why in your terms can I not simply say: 'There sure is a reality out there, but our only means of access to it is a socially constructed form thereof'?

HS: On the face of it, the phrase 'reality is a social construction' suggests that reality itself is some kind of product of social processes. That is why I say it suggests idealism. But your question offers another possible reading of the social construction claim. On this reading, it is not reality itself that is socially constructed but what we take reality to be, so one might alter the phrase to 'what people take for reality is a social construction'. Was this your thought?

GB: Yes, it is, though note that I said that it was the reality that was determined by science that was a social construction. It is worth

being precise on this point, since it is easy to assume a one-to-one correspondence between 'what people take for reality' and 'what scientists take for reality'. There are many different modes for determining reality: from mediation through cognition to action. In our society — for a variety of interesting reasons — science is a privileged mode. Now, my claim is that if we look at the way in which scientists work — at what they do — we will find that the reality they determine is a social construction.

HS: You rightly note that there need be no identity between what scientists and non-scientists believe to be the case. A similar point seems to apply to science itself; namely, there need be no uniform scientific picture of reality that is accepted by all scientists. One reason is that scientists working in the same field frequently diverge from one another in what they believe to be the case.

If this is right, the claim we are discussing is neither that reality itself is socially constructed nor that there is a single world view embraced by all scientists that is so constructed. The claim, rather, is that the beliefs of scientists about the nature of reality are produced by social processes; but is the claim of social construction restricted to belief-formation?

GB: No, we are not just talking about belief-formation. We can do entirely without any talk of beliefs in dealing with social constructions of reality by scientists. We need rather to look at the way in which scientists act in the world. Thus the question of whether or not scientists have different beliefs about the world is irrelevant. However, one could not simply recast your observation that scientists frequently diverge from each other in what they believe to be the case, in the form that scientists 'construct different realities'. Although in one sense this is true — each experiment determines its own reality — I think that on a broader, more commonsense reading of the word 'reality' it can be shown to be historically false. I maintain that there is sufficient generality across scientific practice to constitute a socially constructed scientific world. This world changes over time and space (*viz.*, geographically) but it is broadly coherent at any one moment in history.

HS: I misunderstood you before. In attempting to get a grip on the meaning of the word 'reality' in the phrase 'reality is a social construction', I followed what I took to be your lead in glossing the word as 'what we take reality to be'. Setting aside the issue of who the 'we' in question is, I understood this to mean something like 'the

way reality is believed to be'. That is why I then took the social construction claim as a claim about belief-formation.

You now reject this reading and link the socially constructed reality of scientists with their practice — 'the way in which scientists act in the world'. Thus, if I understand you correctly, the reality that is socially constructed is neither reality itself, nor the way in which reality is believed by scientists to be. It is rather the reality constructed in scientific practice.

GB: The issue of 'belief' is a controversial one for historians and sociologists of science. The reason I objected to the use of the notion of belief with respect to 'social construction' positions was because of the problem of the awareness of beliefs. Now, if you ask scientist X what he or she believes about the world, he or she might give you a very conservative summary of a set of postulates. On the other hand, if you analyse a person's practice in the laboratory, and apply semiotic or other analysis to his or her writings, then you might find that in fact the way that person acts is as if the world is totally at odds with his or her stated belief system. A common example of this would be the person who has no stated belief in astrology, but still defers making big decisions if the planets are misaligned.

HS: I completely agree that we need to distinguish between beliefs scientists explicitly admit to and those implied by their practice but to which they do not admit. To say that reality is a social construction is then to say that there is a 'reality' which is in some way determined both by their practice and by the beliefs their practice implies. Instead of glossing 'reality' in terms of beliefs, we could talk in terms of the picture or model of the way the world is which is implied by their practice.

I am puzzled, though, by your earlier claim that scientific practice is sufficiently general to constitute a world that is 'broadly coherent at any one moment in history'. Surely scientists with radically different theoretical perspectives on the same field of inquiry will engage in different actions? For example, Wegener sought to measure the lateral movement of Greenland, something no permanentist geologist would have been tempted to do. Surely you should allow that practice varies with explicitly held belief and that, in consequence, scientists' socially constructed reality varies as well?

GB: We have reached the point where we need to start defining different types of social construction. One type I have already mentioned is along the lines that at any one time in history, the

community of scientists practice their disciplines in such a way as to indicate a common world view. I would argue that this type changes very slowly, in time with major changes in the political economy. A second type distinguishes between competing positions within a given world view — uniformitarians vs. catastrophists, etc. Here a direct reflection of 'interests' is possible, but not necessary. A third type concentrates on the minutiae of rhetoric and negotiation that go into the construction of scientific truth. This type does not speak directly to either world view or interests: it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the other two.

HS: My objection that there are differences in scientific practice and therefore presumably of socially constructed reality (that is, of the world picture implicit in a practice) applies to the advocate of the first type of social construction that you mention. Since the second type that you mention allows for some kind of variation within a world view, the question arises whether these two types of social construction operate with the same notion of socially constructed reality. It is difficult to see how they can, because the latter seems to allow for variation of socially constructed reality between groups of scientists, whereas the former insists on a single such reality implied by the entirety of scientific practice at a time.

GB: I now need some clarification from you about what you mean by the 'same' notion of socially constructed reality. I see the types that I have described as being compatible — that is, non-mutually contradictory — but not necessarily the same. In the early 1980s a distinction used to be made between a 'strong' and a 'weak' programme. Although this is no longer a useful distinction for a variety of reasons, the concept of different varieties of social construction attached to different areas of scientific practice is, I think, useful.

The first type that I described attaches to all scientific practice. It is to be opposed to, say, a mystical view of knowledge — that knowledge is only to be achieved by inward contemplation. Anyone playing the science game has to subscribe broadly to a set of socially constructed beliefs. Now, the second type refers to differential positions within that first set. Thus I might be a scientist and a Lamarckian, where someone else is a scientist and a Darwinian. There will be things fundamental to their presentations of reality that the Lamarckian and the Darwinian will agree about despite their different 'world views'.

HS: Perhaps it would help if I spelled out explicitly why the first two types of social constructivist you mention seem to operate with different notions of socially constructed reality. The first type of social constructivist insists that there is only one world view throughout science per time period. That is, at any given time in the history of science, there is only one world view implicit in the practice of scientists at that time. By contrast, the second type of social constructivist allows for variation of world view between different groups of contemporaneous scientists. That is, at any given time in the history of science, there is more than one world view implicit in the practice of scientists at that time.

Thus, either the first two types of social constructivist disagree about how many socially constructed world views there may be at a given time, or else they understand the idea of a socially constructed world view differently. To put the point another way: either they differ with regard to the number of realities, or they differ with regard to the meaning of the word 'reality'.

GB: I think that there can be different levels of world view, one nested inside another. Some authors subscribe to just one level. Others are more catholic. This is not, be it noted, a return of the weak/strong distinction where the strong position just seemed to be the weak position plus a little bit more.

Let me give an example of the different levels, one nested inside another. In the nineteenth century, a new kind of scientific law, statistical law, came into being. Statistical laws were based on aggregates of individuals (atoms/people/animal populations, etc.). There is a direct link between the new urban agglomerations of the industrial revolution and the new tools of statistics. This link is the difficulty of administering the increasingly large bureaucracies that grew up. The etymology of the word 'statistics' (state) is indicative of that link. The new 'statistical world view' thus reflected a new kind of social organization; it was socially constructed. I understand Michel Foucault's 'episteme' to refer to this level. Scientists working within the statistical world view were capable of taking radically different positions with respect to particular social and political issues. Thus statistical reasoning was used to maintain eugenicist positions (about the intelligence or lack thereof of Blacks, the poor, Jews, etc.) and to attempt to demonstrate their falsity. Both sides in these debates had socially constructed, political views that were diametrically opposed. This is what I mean by a possible nesting of conflicting world views within one single overarching world view.

HS: What you say meets both the points I have been making. To say there may be rival world views nested in an overarching world view is to use the term 'world view' in two senses. In the first sense, a world view is a set of deep assumptions underlying the science of a time period, while in the second it embraces more specific and variant belief-sets. As for my objection that divergence of belief leads to divergence of practice, the two senses of 'world view' provide a suitable response. Divergent practice reflects divergence of world view in the sense of a specific and variant belief-set against the backdrop of an underlying world view. Given the difference in sense of 'world view', the first two types of social constructivist you mentioned now appear consistent.

Perhaps I could return to something you said at the outset: 'There sure is a reality out there, but our only means of access to it is a socially constructed form thereof'. First, what do you mean by access? Are you using it to mean epistemic access?

GB: Yes, I mean epistemic access. We have epistemic access to something if we are able to have knowledge of it.

HS: It seems to me that your remark about access to reality being socially constructed is problematic. The first clause of this remark rejects an idealistic reading of social constructivism as the claim that reality itself is a construction. But something resembling idealism returns in the second clause. The idea that a socially constructed reality is a world view combines with the claim that our only access to reality is via socially constructed reality to yield the claim that we only have access to our world views: not to reality itself. This appears to dismiss reality itself as an epistemological irrelevance, since it hermetically seals science within a world view and thus cuts it off from reality altogether.

GB: I cannot accept your argument here. The difficulty arises with the first statement: 'a socially constructed reality is a world view'. I was careful earlier to stress that 'world view' had a dimension of practice as well as a dimension of belief in it. The point I was making then was that 'practice' can imply a belief not affirmed by a given scientist. Here I would like to draw attention to another aspect of 'practice'. Scientific practice involves a set of interactions between scientist and reality. Now, scientific practice is inherently socially constructed. Thus, although we have access to reality, we have to

characterize that access (and hence that reality) as socially constructed.

HS: My objection was that the social constructivist isolates science from reality by sealing it within a world view. I agree that if a scientific world view has access to reality via practice, then my objection may fail. But I have yet to be persuaded that it does fail.

A world view is an entity that represents another, whereas a practice involves physical actions typically involving routine and skill. It is difficult to see how a practice, considered as a set of physical actions, can partially constitute a world view. It makes more sense to say that it is the beliefs of scientists — both the explicit ones and those implicit in their practice — that make up their world view: not the actions involved in their practice. But, if this is so, the question remains of how practice bridges the epistemic gap between world view and reality.

Related to this is another problem. You say 'Although we have access to reality, we have to characterize that access (and hence that reality) as socially constructed'. This is ambiguous: it suggests both that any characterization of reality is socially constructed and that reality itself must be characterized as socially constructed. But even if our characterization of reality were socially constructed, it would not follow that reality itself is socially constructed.

GB: You say that it is difficult to see how a practice can constitute a world view. In my view, this is precisely the interesting thing about the social construction of knowledge: the fact that a practice can be integrally and indivisibly a successful practice in the real world and the expression of a world view. Scientists manipulate tools and write texts. Both tools and texts in some way relate to reality. However, both also can be interpreted in terms of the symbolic work that they do. Looking at the two together in this way, we get a world view. Looking at them together in terms of the interface between humanity and nature, we get a practice. You cannot have a practice without a world view and vice versa.

Let me give an example of what I mean by a world view here as it relates to artefacts. High energy physics can be described in part as the art of bombarding particles with other particles. Instruments measure the bombardment and its results; scientists and other instruments (computers, etc.) attempt to draw inferences from these measurements. This practice of bombardment is an element of the world view of scientists forcing nature to reveal her secrets, which is in turn reflective of a particular kind of society. Now the practice of

bombardment clearly does give access to a reality — yet it only gives one kind of access (that permitted by a particular world view). Given this, I have to accept your second point. The phrase 'reality is socially constructed' could be better read as 'our only access is to a socially constructed reality'.

HS: What you say about a practice being 'the expression of a world view' suggests that you do not view the physical actions involved in a practice as mere physical actions. You view them, rather, as interpreted actions; that is, as actions under a description, for example as the set of actions which is described, in our discourse, as bombarding particles with other particles. Thus, it is only under descriptions, and not as the physical movements themselves, that the physical actions involved in practices contribute to world views. Since it is, therefore, the descriptions of the actions and not the actions themselves which contribute to world view, the gap between world view and reality is still unbridged.

But perhaps a hint on how to bridge the gap is contained in your remark that 'Our only access is to a socially constructed reality'. If reality itself is not socially constructed, and we only have epistemic access to socially constructed reality, then we have no epistemic access to reality itself. One might argue that reality itself is epistemically inaccessible, but that practice enables epistemic access to socially constructed reality. There would then be no question of bridging the gap between world view and reality itself. But this would be in tension with your earlier dismissal of my objection that you seal science within a world view and dismiss reality itself as an epistemological irrelevance.

It may clarify matters to see how you respond to the following hypothetical scenario. Let us suppose that while, in reality, the planets describe elliptical orbits around the sun, the socially constructed reality of current science is that planets move in circular paths. Now, if we have epistemic access only to socially constructed reality, it would appear to follow that we know that the planets move in circular paths. In such a situation, do you think we know the planets have circular orbits, or are we mistaken about this?

GB: Your scenario is an interesting one. Before I weigh in with the qualifications, let me answer your question very briefly and directly: we are mistaken about planets having circular orbits. The interesting point is not why and how we are mistaken, but why and how we (the imagined dispassionate observers of your scenario) have a more 'correct' view. Let me start with a quibble, but an important one. It

is said today that planets go in elliptical orbits. This of course is untrue as well — there are an enormous number of perturbations in any planet's orbit, from the level of quantum uncertainty up to the level of the influence of distant galaxies. It is a useful approximation to say that they follow an elliptical path. And that is just the point. If we live in a society where it makes a difference first whether or not we describe the orbits of planets and second whether these orbits are circular or elliptical then I would say that the society that came up with 'elliptical' was more correct. However, the categories themselves — planet, orbit, elliptical, circular — only exist as social constructs and are only developed because of some practical use that they have. For the purposes of our society, it is a reasonable and fair approximation to say that the orbits are elliptical. For other societies, that statement will be quite possibly any one of useless, uninteresting or just plain wrong. This is generally true of all scientific statements; they are all true for a particular society at a particular time.

HS: Your initial response to the scenario is that, in the situation described, we would be mistaken that planetary orbits are circular. This implies a significant qualification of the claim that our epistemic access is limited to a socially constructed reality. For if it is the orbital paths which planets have in reality that determines whether or not we mistakenly believe that they move in circular paths, then our epistemic access is not restricted to socially constructed reality. Since it is the actual orbits of the planets that is relevant to knowledge of planetary orbits, it is the actual orbits which we know or do not know to be circular. In short, epistemic access is not confined to socially constructed reality.

But this apparent weakening of your view is in quite severe tension with some of what you go on to say. First: you say 'If we live in a society where it makes a difference . . . whether these orbits are circular or elliptical', then to say they are elliptical is 'more correct'. But in fact planetary orbits are elliptical, as in our scenario, then it is irrelevant whether it makes a difference to our society that they are. If the orbits are elliptical, then the correct view just is that they are. Second: you say 'for other societies' the statement that orbits are elliptical may be 'just plain wrong'. Again, if the orbits are elliptical, then it makes no sense to say that it is just plain wrong to say that they are. Third: you say scientific statements 'are all true for a particular society at a particular time'. But this flatly contradicts your concession that it is the way the world is — the actual orbits of the planets — that decides whether or not we are

mistaken about the way it is. Perhaps you may see a way to resolve this tension but I do not.

GB: You charge me with 'weakening' my original position by saying that given the choice between elliptical and circular orbits I state that elliptical is better. Let us move again into levels of social determination. The categories 'ellipse', 'circle' and 'planet' do not exist out there in nature: they are social constructs. Now if we have a shared world view (remembering that world views have dimensions of practice and belief) such that for our society these are reasonable ways of partitioning and describing the universe, and further if we have agreed to rules for the game of deciding between theories (either quite simply in terms of some practice — viz. it makes a difference to our navigational charts or in terms of some linguistic practice — viz. rules of logical inference) then quite clearly it is more correct to say that planets move in elliptical orbits rather than circular orbits. All I need to make this statement is epistemic access to socially constructed reality. Which is lucky, since that is all we have got.

HS: Your concession that, in the scenario, we mistakenly believe the orbits to be circular is enough to show that you allow reality itself its rightful epistemic role. The question now is: given your reaction to the scenario — that is, given your acceptance that it is the way things stand in reality that counts for knowledge — why do you insist we have only epistemic access to socially constructed reality?

Perhaps the problem is to be found in your claim that 'the categories "ellipse", "circle" and "planet" do not exist out there in nature: they are social constructs'. You are right, of course, that such concepts are developed by human beings through a process which involves social interactions, so that they are in that fairly uncontroversial sense 'social constructs'. But it does not follow that they do not correspond or refer to things in nature. Take the concept of planet: if by 'planet' is meant roughly 'heavenly body moving in a regular orbital path about a central sun', and if indeed there are things satisfying that description, then the concept 'planet' applies to something real. Concepts may be socially constructed, but the things they apply to need not be.

GB: I take the general point, but feel that it does not apply to this case. Let us indeed take the concept of 'planet'. As a limiting case, I maintain that this is a fully social construct. So far in human history the statement that there are heavenly bodies moving in regular orbital paths about a central sun has proved a useful and interesting one. It

has certainly proved more useful and interesting than the statement that the sun revolves around one of these so-called 'planets'. The fact that the central sun hypothesis works better in our society is a good indication that former societies which believed in a central planet were mistaken on their own terms. However, this is not to say that a concept like planet — or any scientific concept — is universally valid.

To summarize: I work rather from the position that there is a reality 'out there', that there are many possible avenues of access to it (all socially constructed) and that there is no possibility of creating any scientific statement that would be true for all societies at all times. Reality is a useful concept, because something out there sure is resisting, but our descriptions of what it is that is resisting are social to the core.

HS: The position you sketch in your last paragraph involves a relation between truth and reality that is difficult to make sense of. On the one hand, you insist on the existence of a reality that is 'out there'. On the other, you say no scientific statement could 'be true for all societies at all times'. But if you genuinely mean that there is a reality out there, and there are no limits to saying things that apply accurately to that reality, then there should be no problem in allowing that some statements made by scientists are true absolutely. Here by 'absolutely' I mean that the very same statement, or its exact translation into the language of a given society, is true no matter what people in a given society think to be the case. Another way of saying this is that it is the way the world is that determines whether our statements are true or not — and this is the case even if all of our descriptions are 'social to the core'.

From what you have said about there not being any statements true for all societies, I take it you will want to resist this, and that is precisely what I do not yet see that you have any grounds for doing. Do you have an argument that there can be no absolute truths?

GB: No, my position is much more like Gödel's position about consistency in mathematics. Even if it is possible to produce an absolutely true statement then there is no way of proving that it is absolutely true over the range of all possible societies. We have no mechanism for telling whether a statement is absolutely true; that is, not a socially agreed, socially constructed mechanism. And the argument is of course recursive: there may indeed be such a mechanism (I doubt it), but we have no way of deciding whether such a mechanism is true over the range of all possible societies.

HS: I misunderstood you previously. When you said that 'there is no possibility of creating any scientific statement that would be true for all societies at all times' you were speaking not about truth but about acceptance as true. You were not denying the existence of absolute truths. Rather, you were denying that there are truths that must be, or perhaps would be, accepted as truths by all societies. Have I got you right this time?

GB: Yes. I do not deny the possibility that there may be absolute truths, but I do deny that all societies have the same mechanisms of proof and that they accept the same statements as true.

HS: I grant your point that mechanisms of proof need not be shared across all societies. But, given your acceptance of an external reality and of the possibility of absolute truths, it is now unclear to me why you should deny, as you did before, that any scientific statement may be correct in a sense that is independent of society.

GB: I hold that 'absolutely true' statements and reality are not immediately accessible by science, philosophy or any other means. Any statement made about reality will be in some non-trivial way a product of the society producing it. An analogy obtains with knowing God. God speaks in absolute truths — they may or may not exist. However, my belief in the existence of God and his or her absolute truth does not prevent me from recognizing that every society (and every possible society) fashions God in its own image.

HS: You say every society fashions God in its own image. Is this something that you take to be absolutely true? If so, you not only allow the possibility of absolute truth, but also the possibility of recognizing absolute truths.

As for whether absolute truths and reality are 'immediately accessible' — by which I take it you mean 'epistemically accessible' — there is no conflict between denying immediate access and asserting that we have epistemic access to reality itself. We may fail to be in some way in 'direct contact' with reality, and yet what determines whether we have knowledge is our relation to reality itself, rather than to some socially constructed surrogate.

It is unclear how your remarks about God and immediate access bear on your view that scientific statements cannot be correct in any society-independent sense.

GB: You raise a lot of points here, so maybe we should slow down a bit. And I should make some clarifications. First of all, I apologise for my loose talk about God. The reason I mentioned Him or Her was to draw an analogy between any notion of absolute truth and the concept of God. For me, both are unknowable, but it is quite possible for people to have faith that they exist. Actually, I have some faith in the concept of absolute truth and a little less in the concept of God. However, whether or not I have faith in these concepts is, I maintain, irrelevant to the issue of whether I can 'know' them. Both sorts of thing (gods and absolute truths) are unknowable because we are the way that we are — a humanoid race operating on a finite time scale with finite resources. In the most basic sense of the word 'social' here — people plus tools interacting with an environment — we are never going to produce any statement which is not irreducibly people plus tools plus environment.

You also raise the issue of whether this statement about truth is absolutely true. Probably not in the way that you are talking, though I am aware that you have a more sophisticated array of tools for talking about truth than I do. I would say that it is true by definition. That is to say that I have not heard of any definition of absolute truth that does not factor out the people and the tools bit, to just leave a pure environment, and I personally work from a definition of the human race that denies the possibility of our achieving that factoring.

HS: The notion of absolute truth is not deep. The truth of a statement depends on the way of the world and not what a society thinks to be the case. Given this, I do not see why truths are unknowable. Take some mundane truth. Say, 'Grass is green'. Given the standard analysis of knowledge as rationally justified true belief, there is no reason we could not know this statement to be true. What is required is that we have evidence for the truth of the statement, that the statement be true, and that we believe it so. If all three conditions obtain, we know grass is green. Of course, we might be mistaken about the colour of grass due to some sort of illusion. But that does not remove the point that we could have knowledge of the colour of grass, and that as a result truth is not unknowable.

You might wonder whether this involves cleansing the truth 'grass is green' of all societal elements. I see no reason why it should. All that is required for truth is that the stuff referred to by the term 'grass' have the colour referred to by the term 'green'. These terms

are defined in language use by human language users, which introduces an ineliminable social component.

My point about your claim about fashioning God in the image of society was this: how can you deny that we are able to establish absolute truths, yet assert this absolute truth about God and the image of society? A similar point applies to your remark that both gods and absolute truths are unknowable — is this remark an absolute truth? It seems that, on the one hand, you assert things as absolute truths, while, on the other, you deny that it is possible to do so.

GB: To take your points in turn. I have been trying to argue consistently that there is more to 'social construction' than the observation that we use language to communicate our results. Every part of those results — that there is a thing called grass and that there is a colour called green in our example here — is in turn socially constructed. Not because we agree that that is the name for that thing out there, but because those things would not exist without our agreement. Again, this is not to say that there is no reality affecting our descriptions, just that said reality radically underdetermines our theories about it.

Turning to your second point, I think that this provides a way of starting to reflect back on our dialogue by talking about what we think we have been doing while we have been communicating with each other. I have seen myself as being engaged in describing my own picture of social construction, and, if I am honest, also in attacking a position that offers a 'purified' reality, since ultimately I consider that position has very unfortunate political and social consequences. In painting my picture and conducting my attack, I have used the tools to hand. One of those tools (a rhetorical one) is to couch one's statements as absolutely true. It rather mitigates against the effect if I preface every remark I make with the caveat: 'Of course, I am only saying this so as to try and convince you of the validity of my own social and political position'. On the other hand, I am quite happy to admit to this caveat to all my remarks in this dialogue.

HS: I said truth is nothing deep, but you seem to need to be persuaded of this. You accept there is a world 'out there' and also that humans are language-users. Now take the terms 'grass' and 'green'. Either they refer or they fail to refer. If they fail to refer, 'grass is green' is false. But if they refer, it does not follow that it is true. It is required not only that the terms have reference but that what they refer to be in the right relation, namely, that grass be green

(or belong to the class of green things). Given this, it is not at all clear why 'social construction' has any relevance to the issue of truth. Once it is allowed that humans use language and that there is a reality, the only issues of any relevance are the reference or otherwise of the expressions employed, and the relations between the things referred to.

This should remove the need for your claim that you do not speak in absolute truths but only to achieve a political goal. In any event, as a simple matter of the conditions governing discourse, it is doubtful that you can avoid reliance in your speech on an absolute notion of truth. And, assuming you did manage to do so, it would hardly shore up your political stance, since what appeal a political stance can have must surely rest on its being perceived to be a correct one.

As for making a reflexive turn at this stage in the discussion, that strikes me as a good idea. You have made a good start by admitting that you speak only to achieve political aims. For my part, reflecting on this admission of yours, I feel like a straight man in someone else's comedy act.

GB: I see your point about truth not being a 'deep' concept. I also see a contradiction between this claim and the rest of what you have just said. Clearly if a notion of absolute truth is to be a condition of all discourse, then it must play a greater role than you first admit. Let me unpack this comment a bit. For you, it boils down to a simple dichotomy: 'Either they refer or they fail to refer'. What I have been saying all along is that they refer for some people some of the time (viz. for specific social, political, historical reasons). For me it is politically important to establish this point because I have seen (in practice) how the notion of absolute truth has been used through the ages to create the powerful ideology of an elite (political, philosophical, religious, scientific) having privileged access to truth and thence having the right to legislate for the rest of us.

This leads directly onto the question of our own interventions in this dialogue. Your split between my comedian and your straight man assumes that somehow you are right about your half and me about mine. On the contrary, I believe that we are both engaged in an extremely interesting and important politico-philosophical discussion, that we are both using the rhetorical tools at our disposal, and that we are both trying to describe truth as we see it. We are both comedians.

For my part, on reflection I find it revealing that you should use the language of comedy anyway: it shows the persistent misreading of

social constructivist positions by many philosophers as somehow degrading the philosophical enterprise, clowning around. On the contrary, I take it very seriously. So, my final reading is that we are both very serious comedians.

HS: I will be brief about truth so we can get on with the serious business of comedy. There is no contradiction between truth being simple and important; it is a simple notion with an important role in communication, particularly assertion. As for the political importance of resisting the notion of absolute truth, your concern is misdirected. It is not the notion of absolute truth that builds the ideology of powerful elites. Rather, it is the thought that some elite uniquely possesses the truth. One can recognize that no elite has such privileged access without dispensing with the notion of truth.

Incidentally, we are in danger of running together two ideas with talk of absolute truth. One is that truth depends on the way the world is and not what people think is the case. The other is that of an ultimate set of truths concerning the nature of the world. I have been thinking of absolute truth in the former sense. Your remark about elites suggests you have the latter idea in mind.

When I said I felt like a straight man in someone else's comedy I was registering my surprise at being told that you have been engaged in this dialogue in political action, seeking to realize political ends. I had understood our efforts to be directed to analysis of the idea of the social construction of reality. As part of these efforts, I have sought clarification of various claims you have made about social construction, and I have raised a number of objections against some of your claims. Thus, it came as something of a surprise to hear that you were not engaged in the same activity as I, but rather had some ulterior political purpose in mind. It was as if the rug were pulled from under my feet.

GB: I find myself having the same response to your point about truth and your point about comedy. Let me make the point first, and then filter your comments through it. Where I think we are differing is precisely on the status of any form of dialogue. For me, any kind of utterance can only be understood fully in its full historical context. If you say to me that there is no *in principle* connection between powerful elites and the concept of absolute truth, my response is quite simply that historically there has always been such a connection and that there are in this society very good and strong causal links uniting the two. If we want to change that, then we need to operate on two fronts simultaneously: changing society so that the link is undone and

changing philosophical discourse in the same way. Just saying that there is no necessary connection 'in principle' is not going to do the job. Similarly with your point about our aims in this dialogue. I understand our dialogue not as a series of moves existing out there in some timeless realm. We have been making a series of statements that have a well-defined historical and symbolic dimension. My reading is that we are both engaged in all three dimensions (historical or political, symbolic and philosophical) but that for very good strategic reasons you are only recognizing the philosophical.

Your point about the two meanings of absolute truth is a good one. I certainly take some form of the latter reading. What is the point of truths existing out there unless there is a form of access and a way of recognizing that we have access? I'd be quite happy to accept the fact that there are pink unicorns on Mars if it didn't change anything for me: it is only when pink unicorns and absolute truths start to impinge on me (via elites, historically) that I get upset and start to fight back.

HS: To repeat myself, by absolute truth I understand simply that what is true is determined by the world, not by what we believe. It would be interesting to hear what special link you think exists between truth, understood in this sense (rather than in the sense of a set of ultimate truths) and the ideology of powerful elites. On the face of it, the truth of empirical claims made by members of an elite, as well as those made by members of any other class, is a matter determined by the way things stand in reality, not by how things stand in their heads.

I quite agree that this dialogue does not exist in a timeless realm: that a philosopher and a sociologist should be engaged in such an analysis of social construction is clearly a reflection of our current social, historical and intellectual contexts. Still, I do not understand why you say I only recognize the philosophical dimension of our discussion. Surely, it is stating the obvious to say that the topic of this dialogue has been social construction? That this dialogue has been conducted within a specific historical setting does not in the least alter the fact that has been the topic under discussion. As for whether discussion of such a topic is itself political activity, it is no doubt political in some sense of the term: the question is whether it is a useful or interesting sense.

But rather than wrangle about the meaning of that much-abused term, perhaps it would be more productive to consider the point of our present reflective efforts. What does 'reflexivity' mean for you?

GB: My understanding of reflexivity bears directly on my response to the earlier part of your reply. It strikes me from what you have said with respect to both social construction in general and reflexivity in particular that one of your reactions has been 'Okay, I accept all that context stuff, but that aside, we are still talking about truth, justice, the American way'. I think on the contrary that talking about our own dialogue is providing another way of structuring our exploration of the fact that (for me) context cannot in any sense be abstracted away. The fact (for me) that we are engaged in a political and moral as well as a philosophical exploration and the fact that (for me) we have a degree of emotional and intellectual capital invested in the outcome of our inquiry means, first, that our moves are not appearing out of nowhere, nor is the last move in the dialogue a sufficient condition for its response. We have both drawn on our own moral and political repertoires in order to understand and construct our own notions of truth. Second, since the outcome does mean something to us, we have naturally both deployed a range of rhetorical strategies, and furthermore this range of strategies is integral to the dialogue (it cannot be abstracted out).

HS: My aim here has been to examine metaphysical and epistemological aspects of the claim made by social constructivists that reality is, in some sense, a social construction. That examination has involved considering the ontological character of the notion of reality employed by constructivists, as well as inquiring into the role that truth and reality have within the constructivist perspective. Issues of justice and morality have little apparent relevance to these questions.

I would be the last to deny that our discussion has taken place within a particular set of historical circumstances, but you appear to suggest that these circumstances — our socially constructed context, as you might say — are intrinsically involved with our discussion, so that our discussion cannot be understood without taking into account those circumstances. It is this intrinsic involvement of context with content that makes reflexivity necessary. Is this how you see it?

GB: In a word, yes. If I am right about social construction and the operation of all scientific thought simultaneously in several dimensions, then it must be the case that our own dialogue is operating in this way. This brings me back to the point of sufficiency. If I am right, then we cannot in principle treat our own dialogue as operating in a linear fashion continuously along one dimension. Various moves, sub-moves we have made and directions

we have taken, have not been uniquely determined by the 'content' of the preceding move(s) — in order to account for and understand our own dialogue we need to bring in more than just the language of logic and philosophy: we need to look at context, and bring in the language of politics, rhetoric and so forth.

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