

Social Construct Theory: Relativism's Latest Fashion

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Modern intellectuals dislike being called “relativists” and “subjectivists” as much as politicians dislike being called “liberals.” Despite refusal to wear these labels, many modern intellectuals, just like the politicians, speak and behave in ways that betray their allegiance to what, in rhetoric, they abjure. A conspicuous example of this double-think is the modern fashion known in psychology as “social construct theory,” *aka* “personal construct theory.” In this essay, I will show that, in spite of their protests to the contrary, social construct theory collapses irretrievably into both moral and epistemological relativism. In fact, it will become clear that social construct theory cannot, if it is to remain consistent, escape solipsism. These and lesser objections included here conspire to demonstrate that social construct theory is incoherent and untenable. It is just another episode in a long-standing romance with irrationalism that has characterized modern epistemologies. If social scientists are treading the path of social construct theory in hope of solving stubborn problems, they are misled; they are walking down a cul-de-sac. The only remedy for their problems is to avoid the cul-de-sac in the first place. They are sorely in need of an alternative epistemology.¹

To assay social construct theory, I will examine the position of Kenneth Gergen, whose work is influential and clearly formulated. Gergen's position is representative of social construct theory at large. Reference to other representatives of social construct theory will not be neglected, but to economize

¹ I am indebted to Dr. James Stedman, psychologist at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, for his bibliographical suggestions and wise counsel regarding various themes and problems central to social construct theory. Dr. Stedman also helped me understand the influence of earlier psychological theories on social constructionism.

time and space, my focus will be on Gergen's work, especially his book, *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*.²

If one mines chapter five of Gergen's book, one discovers highly descriptive passages expressing his theory. In a vigorous and highly readable excursus through the history of social scientific epistemology, Gergen provides a running commentary that discloses guiding assumptions and implications in his accounts of knowledge and the human condition. Let us briefly summarize his account, and then subject it to examination.

I. SUMMARY OF GERGEN'S POSITION

Gergen sees the debate about knowledge as between two worldviews: the *exogenic*, according to which knowledge is objective because grounded in an external environment driving the senses, and the *endogenic*, according to which objectivity is suspect because knowledge is "a product of the processing agent." In his work, Gergen is an enthusiastic advocate of the endogenic perspective, and regards the accomplishments of modern epistemology and social science as a vindication of the endogenic view of knowledge. To observe how he develops his position, it is first helpful to see how he distinguishes in some detail the exogenic from the endogenic viewpoints. A number of corollaries attend upon these contrasting views of knowledge. Gergen takes pains to catalogue them. (1) Whereas the exogenic view aims for consensus on account of its commitment to objective experience, presumably based on objects that can be examined publicly, the endogenic epistemology must resign itself to multiple interpretations about objects; such diverse interpretations are each legitimate because the idea of public examination is itself a construction, *merely another theory* about how knowledge takes place. Moreover, consensus may be morally suspect because "if total accord exists within a group, it may be a signal either of oppressed minority views or shallow conformity."³ (2) The exogenic thinker believes in "scientific neutrality." Reality is independent of the observer, and the objects of reality determine knowledge. The observer should not obtrude his or her values in experience of the object, for this would obscure or interfere with knowing "the state of nature."⁴ The endogenic thinker believes that knowledge is "psychologically generated." As a result, scientific neutrality is an illusion. (3) According to the exogenic thinker, "the empirical world impinges on the senses." Empiricism, then, is the paradigm of exogenic epistemology. Causal events in

² Kenneth Gergen, *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge* (Leipzig: Springer-Verlag, 1982), ch. 5, pp. 173-209.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

the environment are ultimately the source of knowledge, a conviction that inclines the exogenic thinker to determinism. To explain knowledge in terms of external antecedent events is to situate knowledge as one more event in the structure of cause and effect which describes the universe and its laws. In contrast, the endogenic thinker *constructs* or *interprets* "sense data furnished either from the environment or from memory."⁵ In light of this, the causal agency of knowledge and action is intramental, not extramental. Accordingly, endogenic epistemology can champion voluntarism over determinism. (4) Since science is "values neutral," the exogenic thinker believes in the separation of fact and value. Hence, questions of value are not properly the subject-matter of the discipline. However, for the endogenic epistemologist, it is impossible for the knower to be neutral or independent of what is known. As a result, fact and value are inseparable. If this is so, moral issues inevitably obtrude into scientific accounts. "To declare them irrelevant may itself be morally culpable."⁶ Hereby, relativism and amoralism are avoided. (5) Exogenic thinkers have confidence in methods of measurement and control. In this way the facts speak for themselves without interference from bias and interpretation. Endogenic thinkers, however, doubt whether "correct assessments" are really possible. "Thus, empirical methods may be seen as means of sustaining theoretical positions already embraced. Given a particular theoretical standpoint, methods may be anticipated that will yield support. Methods thus furnish rhetorical rather than ontological support for the scientist."⁷

According to Gergen, the history of social scientific epistemology has been a gradual vindication of the endogenic perspective. In its efforts to be unequivocally scientific, psychology in the early twentieth century was committed "to unlock nature's secrets through systematic empirical study," an attitude that was also combined with the "long standing belief in mind as an empirical entity."⁸ Such confidence in pure objective science soon began to wane. Just as physicists came to need principles such as "energy," "wave," and "field," even though none of them is directly observable, so psychologists claimed to need their own "hypothetical constructs." Such terms did not refer to immediate observables, but they were permitted "provided that one could ultimately tie them, through a series of linking definitions, to public observables."⁹ This liberalizing trend was greatly stimulated by the migration from Germany of Gestalt thinkers such as Wolfgang Köhler, Max Wertheimer,

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

and Kurt Koffka. Confident that their research showed that the human subject's own psychological processes formed such phenomena as "figure, ground, groupings and movement from a stimulus array that did not itself contain such properties," a genuine romance with endogenic thought emerged in social scientific circles.¹⁰ The exogenic perspective was further compromised by the influential work of Kurt Lewin.

Serious erosion of the exogenic world view accelerated under the influence of "a broad-scale disenchantment with exogenic assumptions in philosophy."¹¹ The self-refuting character of positivism's verification principle undermined faith in empiricism. Positivism seemed especially naive once A.J. Ayer "admitted that sense data cannot be conclusively used to prove assertions about the physical world."¹² So much for verification, and yet "even Popper's falsification thesis has not resisted deterioration . . . because what counts as data relevant to a theory's falsification cannot easily be specified outside the language of the theory itself, the range of potential threats to a theory may be severely truncated. In effect, what counts as a fact cannot be separated easily from theoretical premises."¹³ The work of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Karl Feyerabend compounded these doubts, since they argue that science is more anarchical than has been supposed. According to Feyerabend, "hypotheses contradicting well-confirmed theories should be championed, and social and ideological persuasion should be given equal footing with evidence."¹⁴ Evidence cannot be sorted out of ideology. If so, the endogenic world-view has been vindicated.

In Gergen's historical summation of how endogenic epistemology triumphs over exogenic philosophy, considerable attention is given to Wittgenstein. A very important influence on social construct theory was ordinary language philosophy. Modern epistemologies presumably made it plausible that social context is decisively influential on our individual psychologies and knowledge. Wittgenstein attempted to show that the stubborn problems of knowledge plaguing the history of philosophy are created by language. Philosophers are easily bewitched by language because they are naive about how language creates and drives ultimately our perceptions and behaviors. Wittgenstein does not venture, then, to solve the traditional epistemological problems. Rather, he "dissolves" them, showing how they go away once philosophical thinking is purified by linguistic analysis. Such analysis can be used to show that exogenic

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

epistemology and empiricist views of the human person are linguistic constructions resulting from taking the language of cause and effect, where it is appropriate in descriptive research, and applying it to discourse about persons and their faculties of knowing, where it is inappropriate. Such applications are inappropriate because they assume that behavior and knowledge must conform to an argot of cause-effect, which belongs properly only to another language game, called "science." Through language culture shapes how activities and beliefs arise and regulate human behavior. To blithely assume that the way language helps us make sense of one set of human experiences is univocally transferrable to another set is to confuse the mind and to generate hosts of problems that have classically plagued the philosophers. We can escape these "diseases" once and for all by paying close attention to how language controls, indeed manufactures, our understanding of the world. Thus, Wittgenstein commits to the belief that knowledge is a construction of language as the instrument of culture. The consequence of this is that, since each culture evolves and authorizes its own language games, our knowledge is, in the last analysis, culturally bound. Our language constructs and interprets our world, our experience, in such a way that we are effectively shut off from real things. Hence, there is no way one can justify a transcendent philosophy, which exogenic philosophers advocate, a philosophy which believes thought can overcome the limits of language and discover objective truths that transcend language and culture. The diversity of language and language games precludes commonalities or norms that would place truth or value beyond culture. In short, because human beings are historically situated by culture and language, there is no philosophy or set of truths necessary or common to all. Our understanding of the human person is constructed by and is the prisoner of language and culture.. Exogenic knowledge, then, is impossible because it presumes we can escape this prison. As John Shotter, a colleague of Gergen's, has put it:

Thus such an approach takes it that it is *not* the primary function of our talk to represent the world; words do not primarily stand for things. If, in our experience, it seems undeniable that at least some words do in fact denote things, they do so, we would argue, only from within a form of social life already constituted by ways of talking in which these words are used—"to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life"(Wittgenstein). Thus the entities they denote are known not for what they are in themselves but in terms of their "currency" or significance in our different modes of social life, that is, in terms of what is deemed sensible for us to do with them in the everyday, linguistically structured circumstances of their use. They have their being only within the form of life we (the

whole community) conversationally sustain between ourselves . . . such an ontology . . . describes a reality which does not exist independently of our concepts . . . and theoretical discourse.¹⁵

In light of this, there is no *objective* (if we mean by this word objects that exist independently of the mind) morality or science. Morality is a construction of language; likewise, mathematics is an invention of language. Hence, there is no real mathematics in the traditional sense; that is to say, there is no body of necessary and trans-cultural/trans-historical truths that constitute the discipline of mathematics. There is only "ethnomathematics."

Of course, if social constructionists deny the possibility of knowledge that transcends cultural and historical determinations, the Protagorean implications become obvious. In fact, even certain social scientists who criticize social construct theory commonly admit that the theory is correct insofar as it warns us against thinking that the human mind can go beyond scientific and linguistic structures so as to grasp the real. For example, while disagreeing that social construct theory makes pure descriptive science impossible, John Greenwood still concedes that the theory is correct to deny the mind's power to know things in themselves. "Human scientists have no extra-empirical or extra-linguistic access to reality (they have no 'God's-eye view'); in this respect it is analytically true that 'man is the measure of all things.'"¹⁶ Greenwood holds this view about the limits of knowledge because he thinks it is essential to empiricism. Empiricism examines experience, but it does not presuppose that experience puts us in contact with extramental, i.e., *extra-experiential*, things. If Greenwood is right, then empiricism and social construct theory are versions of the same endogenic epistemology, even if Gergen and his associates do not fully appreciate this fact.

This Neo-Protagoreanism is reminiscent of the philosophy of Kant, whose noumenal-phenomenal distinction Gergen takes as axiomatic. Echoes of the distinction are suggested in passages such as the following:

It is important to note at this point that, while sensitive to the many persuasive arguments for the "social construction of reality," the emerging view does not simultaneously commit the scientist to the endogenic extreme: reality as subjective. That is, one may accept the empiricist assumption of a real world but simultaneously separate the construction of knowledge systems, or the way one

¹⁵ John Shotter, "Social Constructionism and Realism," *Theory and Psychology*, vol. 2, pp. 176-177.

¹⁶ John Greenwood, "Realism, Relativism and Rhetoric," *Theory and Psychology*, vol. 2, p. 188.

communicates about the real world, from the experience itself. One may experience without communication and communicate without benefit of experience. From the present standpoint, knowledge about social life is not to be viewed as a “reflection” of what there is, but a “transformation” of experience into a linguistic ontology. To reiterate, the constraints on knowledge as a language are thus not furnished by reality but by social process.¹⁷

In this passage Gergen may grant that there are indeed real objects (*noumena*) but that these do not furnish the content of our knowledge (*phenomena*). Real things may exist but they are not the objects of intelligence and language. On this view, there are no facts to be studied, only factoids: science becomes a theoretical construction, according to which “the investigator is viewed as one who creates through his or her theoretical lens what facts there are to be studied.”¹⁸ By arguing that knowledge is a construction, Gergen’s epistemology is analogous to Kant’s. However, for Gergen, influenced as he is by Post-Kantian philosophies, such as Ordinary Language Philosophy, Hermeneutics, Dialectics, Critical Theory, and Deconstructionism, the construction is the result of culture and language rather than the forms and categories of sensibility and intelligence. Still, the result is the same: the identities of objects are manufactured by the mind. All this conspires to teach us, Gergen insists, that naive empiricism must now be displaced by social construct theory, the triumphant heir of endogenic epistemologies. That knowledge is a social construction should redefine the way social science relates to all science and to all knowledge claims. Here he is again:

To the extent that the generation of knowledge is a social process and the social psychologist is committed to an understanding of such processes, then social psychological inquiry does not parallel that of the physicist, chemist, historian, or economist; rather, the social psychologist becomes indispensable in elucidating the grounds upon which physical, chemical, historical, or economic knowledge is based.¹⁹

Gergen is confident that once all knowledge, psychological and otherwise, is understood as a social construction and once the intellectual community concedes “the historical embeddedness of social knowledge,” then epistemology

¹⁷ Kenneth Gergen, *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*, p. 202.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

will be finally put on the right track. What this means is that epistemology abandons philosophy and becomes social science. "It is social rather than philosophic inquiry that may elucidate our understanding of the nature of knowledge and its acquisition."²⁰ Social construct theory not only explains away the traditional philosophical problems of knowledge, it reforms our conceptions of the disciplinary ownership of such problems altogether. Social construct theory is radical but salutary.

It especially has value in reasserting moral valuation back into science. Gergen debunks the myth of a "value-neutral" science. If knowledge systems are fundamentally language systems, theoretical constructions, then it is naive to think these constructions can be free of the values assumptions brought to them by the theoreticians. Accordingly, "the traditional fact-value dichotomy is woefully misleading. Values, ideologies, or visions of an improved society may legitimately enter the arena of 'knowledge making'."²¹ This insight compels the social scientist "to return to the moral concerns so central to August Comte's view of science. Moral debate must come to play an increasingly important role in the new science."²² This is remarkable, defenders of social constructionism insist, since it puts the lie to the charge that their theory must collapse into moral relativism. As Gergen's colleague, John Shotter, has expressed it:

Social constructionism has been accused of moral relativism and nihilism, of destroying any basis, principles or standards in terms of which we can claim an act to be good or bad, just or evil—as if the mechanistic psychology of behaviorism (and now cognitivism) has been a model of ethical enlightenment; as if, until recently, it has been the case that we have always been able to settle moral and ethical disputes by appeals to already existing, agreed, explicit standards or principles. As I see it, in both of these cases this is the opposite of the truth. Following Wittgenstein, I suggest that: "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end—but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language game."²³

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ John Shotter, "A 'Show' of Agency is Enough," *Theory and Psychology*, vol. 5, pp. 387-388.

II. ASSESSMENT OF GERGEN'S POSITION

While brief, the above summary captures the essential outlines of Gergen's epistemology. Is it resistant to criticism? Alas, it is not. In fact, Gergen seems to have developed an account of knowledge that is subject to objections of the most devastating kind, especially those that show social construct theory to be an untenable, self-refuting skepticism, an epistemological and moral relativism, and, in the last analysis, a solipsism.

Criticism #1. An obvious objection to Gergen's theory is his facile assumption that the exogenic alternative is best represented by empiricism. Of course, this is quite mistaken. Greenwood is to be credited for seeing this inconsistency. The actual contrary to endogenic epistemology is classical realism, of which Gergen seems to be totally unaware. Empiricism may *appear* to be an exogenic position but in reality it is not. It is the error of empiricism in the philosophies of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume that ultimately gave rise to epistemologies that shut off the mind's access to extramental things. Once, as Locke argues, the proper objects of knowledge become ideas, mere states of consciousness ("sense data" and "copies of sense data" in the vernacular of contemporary empiricists), then subjectivism, or some version thereof, is inevitable. Once the mind can know only its own contents, it collapses into, at best, a representationalism, which makes "knowledge" of the external world only inaccurate guesswork. Berkeley's subsequent assault on abstraction, by which realist philosophers argue that the mind grasps intelligibilities in extramental things, destines empiricism to embrace Nominalism. Intelligibilities ("universals") become only words or names contrived by convention for sense impressions. Hume's assault on identity robs even sense data of their epistemological authority. Sense-data only acquaints us with flux, which in the end even precludes science. Some structure and reliability for phenomenal science returns with the epistemology of Kant, but this accords with the constructionist view rather than with anything resembling realism.²⁴

²⁴ Of course, once one escapes the delimiting dimensions of modernist epistemologies and once one is equipped with realism to approach problems of knowledge, then one can call into question the overstatement of evidence for Kantian assumptions about mind, convictions that are the bread-and-butter of Gestalt psychology, for example: "To the extent that autochthonous psychological processes enabled the organism to create figure, ground, form, groupings, and movement from a stimulus array that did not itself contain such properties, then a concept of self-directing, internal process seemed inescapable." (Kenneth Gergen, *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*, p. 182.) Instead of accepting Gergen's remark, it seems more plausible that in Gestalt experiments the mind, rather than inventing the contents of its experience, is judging experience in light of intelligibilities furnished by earlier experience of extramental things. No doubt, the mind has tendencies to perceive and

What this says is that Gergen is naive about the history of modern epistemologies. Constructionist epistemologies are not really contrary to empiricism; instead, they are its bedfellows. Empiricism is a counterfeit opponent to endogenic thought. This naivete about the history of epistemology and the failure to grasp the genuine alternative of *classical realism* compromise Gergen's credibility at the outset. To take an epistemology that is not really exogenic and present it as the exogenic alternative's only champion is to surrender to constructionism before the debate begins. Social scientists may not be alert to this because social science, since it is itself a product of modern empiricism, may naively accept Gergen's caricature as standard.

Criticism #2. As we have seen, Gergen argues that "historically situated conventions govern what is taken to be true or valid,"²⁵ so much so that the knower is unable to transcend his or her "historical embeddedness" and know necessary trans-historical truths. "Interpretive theorists," he adds, "have . . . demonstrated that social description does not essentially reflect the empirical world, but shapes the observer's conceptual construction of this world. Thus, theoretical description cannot in principle be data driven."²⁶ This inference, of course, is quite fallacious. No doubt, scientists are partly influenced by cultural assumptions, ideologies, theories, etc., but it does not follow from this that there are no scientific facts or that there are no objects independent of knowers or that we cannot achieve objective knowledge. *The knower* may be partly culturally and historically bound, but *the known* need not be. Even though I and my teachers of mathematics are inevitably partly constrained by our ethnocentric,

judge experience as Gestalt experimenters say. But these findings need not be because the mind imposes *a priori*, Kantian structures on experience. Another explanation, a realist one, could be that the mind has these Gestalt tendencies because of experience itself, not because of intramental forms and categories. The intellect, formed (or *informed*) by prior experience, perceives new experiences in light of what it already knows. Accordingly, in Gestalt experiments the intellect may already bring intelligibilities, concepts, forms, principles, and judgments to the table without these requiring the conclusion that these are *a priori* intramental cognitive structures, after the fashion of Kant. True, the mind has faculties (sensory and intellectual powers), but these need not determine the intelligible *content* of our knowledge, or need not *constitute* the objects of experience. To assume that they do is merely a theory presupposed to explain experiments in a Kantian fashion. Gestalt experiments are not resistant to a realist epistemology. In the spirit of Ockham's razor, one ought not to invent *a priori* structures and principles if ordinary experience can explain an event otherwise. Gestalt thinkers seem too anxious to resort to Kantian-like categories and forms before giving ordinary experience—in a word, realism—a chance to account for experiment and experience.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

androcentric, eurocentric, and logocentric culture, there is no reason to think any of this undermines, constructs, or otherwise meaningfully influences the objective truths of mathematics, or objective knowledge in general for that matter. My culture no doubt influences my understanding, but this does not change the fact that $5 \times 5 = 25$. There are “ethnomathematicians,” surely; mathematicians are human beings, who always exist in society and history. But this does not mean there is “ethnomathematics.” The contingencies that describe the knower and his historical and social circumstances need not describe the object known. The knower is contingent, but the object could be necessary. If our intellects can know such objects, then the human person as a knower can transcend contingent spatio-temporal circumstances, including our social, cultural, and historical constraints. It is this possibility of transcending the contingent that social construct theory denies. Of course, such a view commits one to relativism. But one is under no obligation to accept the social construct theorist’s conclusion, because it derives from a fallacious argument.

The social construct theorist would be well-served to pursue a realist epistemology which, armed with distinctions such as substance-accident, enables the mind to make sense of how change and contingency may be known but do not have the last word in knowledge. For example, the human person is subject to all kinds of changes and modifications: personal, social, biological; in size, in color, in disposition, etc. But none of these militate against the fact that the human person is still, in nature, a rational animal. As such it necessarily follows that, in spite of accidental modifications, a human being is intelligent, capable of symbolic speech, grammatical, risible, capable of choice, morally responsible, etc. It would be easy to multiply such examples. The point is that a realist epistemology need not surrender knowledge to contingency and change.²⁷

However, the empiricist assumptions behind social construct theory make such surrender inevitable, because both the knower and the known are reduced to contingent and “constructed” events. After all, following Hume the empiricist reduces the human person to a collection of sense-data, all of which are in flux. The person at best is just a loosely bundled collection of impressions and ideas held together or “constructed” by habits. Thus, both knower and known are dissolved into contingency and change by the empiricist analysis of object and self. Realism enables us to escape empiricism from the outset. That Gergen seems unaware of genuine realism, that he mistakes empiricism as a version of

²⁷ This argument is made very effectively and at length by Raymond Dennehy in his clever essay, “The Philosophical Catbird Seat: A Defense of Maritain’s *Philosophia Perennis*,” in *The Future of Thomism*, ed. Deal W. Hudson and Dennis Wm. Moran, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), pp. 65-76.

it, and that he seems unaware of the agreement between empiricism and constructionism regarding fundamental assumptions about knowledge discloses serious inadequacies in his account of the limits of human knowledge.

Criticism #3. Another problem afflicts social construct theory. Doesn't it assert exactly what it denies? Social construct theory denies that there is trans-cultural truth, yet it maintains that it itself is true. But doesn't this effort to assert itself as true contradict its own nature as an epistemological theory? Doesn't its demand that it stand above competing alternative epistemologies as the most cogent amount to a transcendent claim? By holding that social construct theory is true it states that there is a truth for all cultures and language games: namely, the truths of so-called "social construct theory," a doctrine now asserting itself as the preferred explanation of knowledge. Here, the social construct theorist has begun to tread the waters of self-refutation.

Predictably, the social construct theorist might respond the way Wittgensteinians and Postmodernists respond. The social construct theorist puts forward his or her theory as just another language game, but one which has great appeal because it helps us organize something important: namely, science. In this way, social construct theory can assert its plausibility: it is *locally* true, given our scientific culture and its language game, but it is not *globally* true.²⁸ Global truths are assertions of a trans-cultural, trans-linguistic kind. The implausibility of exogenic epistemology rules out such assertions. But within a language game, assertions can be tested as more or less satisfactory given the assumptions about coherence and plausibility implicit in the language game.

This reply, commonly made by Rorty, Derrida, and the Wittgensteinians, is clever, but will not do. First of all, to distinguish between global truths and local truths is itself a distinction impossible on social construct theory. The distinction only makes sense if we know what a "global truth" consists of. But we only know such a truth by our ability to rise cognitively above our own limiting culture and language. Once one understands that there is a standard of "global truth," what is there to prevent one from attaining it? To achieve the

²⁸ This distinction is made by John Greenwood, who employs it to qualify his epistemological relativism. His remarks are typical. Even our scientific terms and beliefs "are grounds for intellectual modesty, because they are grounds for a *global* relativism about scientific theories. Human scientists have no extra-empirical or extra-linguistic access to reality (they have no 'God's eye view'); in this respect it is analytically true that 'man is the measure of all things.' These are not, however, grounds for *local* relativism, which denies that one can ever have empirical grounds for preferring one set of theoretical descriptions over others, because of the supposed underdetermination of theories by data." John Greenwood, "Realism, Relativism and Rhetoric," *Theory and Psychology*, vol. 2, p. 188. (See above, note 16.)

transcendent perspective necessary to make the distinction contradicts social construct theory, which insists that such transcendence is impossible. This same objection can be leveled at Kant. How does one know there is a difference between noumena and phenomena if the human knower, since his mind is walled-in by concepts constraining him to know phenomena only, cannot know things-in-themselves? Observations such as these call us to doubt the very roots of any such anti-realist projects.

Criticism #4. As a corollary to the above observations, the postmodernist reply seems helpless to answer this question: how do you solve competing claims between language games? Social construct theorists and their fellow Postmodernists will declare that, to take two examples, science and democracy are language games. One can presumably only evaluate these language games by stepping into them, by granting their assumptions, and by persuading others of the same “language.” This is a necessary consequence of their position, as we have seen, since they deny any norms above language games which could situate decisively evaluations between them. Hence, one must never presume to evaluate one language game using the criteria of another. But this seems implausible—nay, incredible. Surely, we can adjudicate between the language games of science and the flat earth society; likewise, between the Nazis and people who cherish democracy. Of course, the social construct theorist might say that we can adjudicate them only in a way that is cogent for us—those in the language game of Western individualism and Enlightenment rationalism. With reference to the criteria of Western individualism, the Nuremberg Trials, accordingly, have no substance except for those in the language games of the Allies and the democratic peoples. The moral norms at the Trials have no authority over the accused who speak another language game. The democracies have no right to judge others since moral norms are relative to different cultures. This, one may recall, was precisely Sartre’s position in his game effort to stay consistent. But here the postmodernist has made his own reply. To assert such a view is simply counter-intuitive. It seems far more plausible to argue that an epistemology which enables us to judge the Nuremberg Trials is simply more convincing than one which says we have to shrug our shoulders and dismiss such a moral and legal exercise as arbitrary. It is ridiculous to argue that genocide is not mass murder (i.e., morally wrong) or that it only becomes such in a language game. Beyond its implausibility, such a view is certainly politically dangerous on any language game, a most unbecoming scenario for an epistemology which aims to reassert moral values back into scientific discourse. To paraphrase Peter Kreeft, we should be thankful for the social construct theorist. He provides us an arresting object lesson. If you embrace his epistemology be

prepared to recover “morality” in your language game, while you excuse Nazi war criminals.²⁹

Social construct theory is a typical nominalism, in which a system of words is invented, either by the individual thinker or by convention, to authorize truth/falsehood, goodness/badness, and right/wrong. Since reality does not provide the standards to judge these differences, then “the system” is the only authority about claims of truth, goodness, and rightness, no matter how contrary to the experience of the ordinary person or to common sense. (The “ordinary language” philosophers like to think they’re “in touch” with the ordinary man, but I’ve met no ordinary man who believes truth claims are just constructions.) These nominalists rely on the fact that most people will not ask them specifics. For example, if a parent goes to the cupboard to prepare breakfast for the child, she might encounter a box of oatmeal and a box of ground-glass, inadvertently left on the shelf by the repairman. Surely, the parent does not believe the difference between these two substances is just a construction. If so, how are these objects constructed? Wouldn’t it make a real difference if the child were fed ground glass as opposed to oatmeal? Sea-changes in culture and language would make no difference to the child. Social construct theory, as well as its allied epistemologies in modern thought, appears to have credibility among the intelligentsia because the latter do not ask such specific and embarrassing questions. The advantage for them, of course, is that they get to have their cake and eat it; they enjoy the advantage of expecting others to accept their views while not arguing for them. Modern thought has given them rhetorical means to obtain this advantage. For one thing, the debate has been set up by the nominalists so that the voice of classical realism is dismissed or marginalized. To ask questions from that perspective is to risk being labeled philosophically backward, unaware of the “advance” of modernist, nominalistic, Humean and Kantian epistemologies. But this rhetoric simply evades hard criticism so as to continue vaguely talking about how the mind, culture, or language constructs experience. It is one thing to assert such an anti-realist epistemology; it is another to justify it in light of concrete, particular cases. When asked these specifics, anti-realism becomes not only implausible but incredible.³⁰

²⁹ Peter Kreeft, “Are There Any Moral Absolutes?: Finding Black and White in a World of Grays,” from *Making Choices* (New York: Servant Publications, 1990); anthologized in *Good Order: Right Answers to Contemporary Questions*, ed. Brad Miner (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), pp. 78-88; see especially pp. 87-88.

³⁰ One of the ironies of endogenic thought—Gergen’s expression for modern skepticism and nominalism—is that it must refute itself in setting up its account of knowledge. To put forward the problem of skepticism, one must doubt the veracity of experience. One must doubt whether experience is in contact with extramental things. What grounds does one

Criticism #5. Social construct theory also suffers serious problems of coherency. Consider that according to social construct theory knowledge and communication are constructions of society: “. . . in contrast to the empiricist position,” Gergen declares, “we find a metatheory that places the locus of knowledge not in the minds of single individuals, but in the collectivity. It is not the internal processes of the individual that generate what is taken for knowledge, but a social process of communication. It is within the process of social interchange that rationality is generated. Truth is the product of the collectivity of truth makers.”³¹ In other words, their theory by definition depends on the existence of society. But this fact is another embarrassment to social construct theory, because the conditions for the existence of society contradict the basic principles of their epistemology. After all, you can only have a society if there is communication between substances, the only kind of communication worthy of the name. But those substances that communicate are persons. There is no point to communication unless other persons exist. Otherwise, communication is just the self in “dialogue” with itself. Phenomenalism denies knowledge of substance and makes genuine communication, and thus society, impossible. Unless other persons exist, Gergen is only talking to himself, which reduces his position to solipsism. This is a fine point that seems to have escaped Gergen. So if societies really exist, they are made up of persons. Persons are *ontologically prior* to society. It appears, then, that social construct theory exploits the hope that nobody will point out that if there is society and language, there are persons constructing culture and knowledge.

If there are persons, then we must ask: are they *real* or themselves just constructions? They cannot be constructions of society, because society does not exist without persons. The *reality* of persons is a necessary condition for the existence of society itself. Hence, if persons are a construction, they are constructed by the mind of the individual. This leads to radical subjectivism. Hence, social construct theory—if it argues that persons are constructed—collapses into solipsism, a position Gergen does not want. Given the alternatives, social construct theory is on the proverbial horns of a dilemma. The absurdity

have for such doubt? Descartes explains that it is because sometimes the mind makes errors. But in erecting this standard between truth and error, he contradicts his skepticism, because that standard is supplied by experience. We learn to doubt and become aware of error by experience of, say, a stick in water that appears bent. It is inconsistent to deny the veracity of experience when experience teaches us what error is. Descartes must prove that experience is not veridical, but he must presuppose its veracity in order to accomplish his skepticism. As St. Augustine pointed out centuries ago in *Contra Academicos*, all skepticisms seem plagued by this incoherency.

³¹ Kenneth Gergen, *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*, p. 201.

of solipsism requires that Gergen rebound to the alternative that society exists because persons *really* exist. But clearly, if Gergen grants this, he has given up his position, for he must admit that the people he communicates with in his language game are real, i.e., *things in themselves*.

Allow me to express this point in a more homely way: Gergen, no doubt, believes he is writing for a public. Yet, if he is consistent with his theory, he must hold that the idea of the public, like all other ideas, is a construction. But this incites us to ask: Whom is he addressing when he writes or speaks? A real person or a construction? Surely, he is not going to waste his time talking to a construction. Hence, unless he is willing to say he expends all this energy talking to chimerae (which is what certain types of psychotics do), he must admit that he is speaking to *real* persons. No doubt, his publisher is a part of that *real* public, as is the *real* check that he receives for royalties. Well, *if people are real, so are things*. After all, people are animals, albeit social animals, and thus are made up, at least in part, of *biological and physical features*, which must be independent of mental constructions in order to make people different from Gergen and from each other. But if this is true, then Gergen must admit that science in principle (consisting of such disciplines as biology and physics) studies objects that are not constructions, for the very possibility of the existence of those creatures (persons/socio-linguistic beings) who would construct them demands their prior existence.

In a simple cross-examination, we ask the social construct theorist this question: Do persons exist as independent and autonomous entities on some level? If he answers "yes," he gives up his position because the answer implies that there are real, extramental, non-constructed conditions for the existence of persons (an *ontological* commitment that betrays the endogenic character of social construct theory on the most fundamental level); if he answers "no," he commits to solipsism, implying that the human person, along with all her dignity and rights, is just an invention of the social construct theorist's own mind!

Criticism #6. What we have said thus far shows that social construct theory plunges down the shaft of solipsism and relativism. Gergen and his sympathetic colleagues, such as John Shotter, insist that social construct theory is not amoral or relativistic, but actually seeks to restore moral discourse to scientific inquiry: "The sociobehavioral scientist is invited, if not compelled, to return to the moral concerns so central to August Comte's view of the science. Moral debate must come to play an increasingly important role in the new science."³²

Of course, we want to know whether there is any point to such a debate given Gergen and Shotter's theory of knowledge. There are no objective

³² *Ibid*, p. 205.

standards that can ever decide such a debate. Hence, the language game of morality must reduce to political power. As we mentioned earlier, Sartre was aware of this. That is why he chose not to champion the Nuremberg trials. It is a sham, according to such postmodernist epistemologies, to demand that one language game be measured by another. Hence, the Nuremberg trials is a hypocrisy because it confuses language games. If such an epistemology, then, cannot decide something so basic and obvious as crimes against humanity, how is it going to restore moral norms to guide debates of lesser and more controversial matters?

This leads us to suspect that the recovery of moral discourse is really just a smokescreen for the infusion of politics into social science. Social construct theory cannot justify objective moral norms. Well, from where do these “norms” come? From the community that constructs them. Which community? Which language game? The answer is: from the community with the “correct” language game. Once such issues reduce to community construction, then those norms are “correct” when there is a community to persuade and enforce them. There is no more to moral discourse than that. There cannot be on their epistemological theory. This brings us to the really sinister quality of social construct theory. It is a way for certain social scientific elites to anoint themselves as the stewards of the language of moral discourse and thus decide what is right or wrong, just or unjust. Hereby, they create the culture of the educated, of the moral, of the “correct,” all of which, when accompanied by political power, quickly turns into social engineering.

Even if all our many earlier criticisms were not persuasive, these last observations ought to caution champions of thought and freedom everywhere against social construct theory. It appears to be just another ruse by certain social scientists to grab power in our culture. Their epistemological and moral relativism is about effecting political change. Haven't they done enough damage already?