The Construction of Realism

Volker Gadenne ◇ Johannes Kepler Universität, Linz (Austria) <volker.gadenne@jku.at>

► **Purpose** – To develop a realistic view that integrates the idea that knowledge is a constructive process. ► **Problem** – In the controversy between realism and constructivism, both sides have often misunderstood each other. Many realists still consider constructivism as a kind of idealism. And constructivists often assume that realists believe they have direct access to things as they really are. It seems necessary to clarify the statements of either side, to rule out some misunderstandings, and then to discuss anew the central epistemological problems. ► **Solution** – A version of realism is proposed that takes into account constructivist ideas and objections. Realism as presented here is not opposed to the idea that cognition is a constructive process. According to this view, reality is something we presuppose in any attempt to attain knowledge though we can never be certain how things really are. Having knowledge amounts to the preliminary judgment that some hypotheses seem to correspond to reality better than others. In addition, it is demonstrated that a constructivist position that reduces the claim to knowledge even further does not solve the problems better but creates new ones. Finally, Mitterer's non-dualizing view of descriptions is discussed. It is argued that description necessarily presupposes something different from language. ► **Key words** – realism, constructivism, idealism, fallibilism, self-refutation, description, non-dualizing philosophy.

1. Introduction

Constructivism has been developed to account for certain results in biology, cognitive science, and social science, and to overcome traditional epistemology, especially realism. But what is realism? There are now thirty or more "realisms" with specifications such as "ontological," "scientific," "pragmatic," "structural," or "direct." Some of them involve assumptions rather similar to those of constructivists. Yet they are called "realism," probably because those who hold these views want to emphasize that they aren't idealists and believe in something that exists independently of humans and their minds.

The latter assumption seems to be incompatible with the idea of a "constructed world." And this is why many philosophers still have great difficulty accepting constructivism as something anybody could seriously believe. Searle (1999, p. 18), for example, was much amused when he talked to an ethnomethodologist who claimed that the moon could be "created" by talking. Wolterstorff (1987, p. 233) wondered whether people like Goodman (1978) could really believe that "stars" and even "worlds" were "made" by us. He

came to the conclusion that a constructivist could not mean such statements literally; if he did, "we would question his sanity."

"So you are saying that tables, chairs, and trees do not exist at all," realists often argue against constructivism. This however is a misunderstanding since constructivism is different from idealism (Glasersfeld 1997, p. 249). But realists, too, often get the impression that their view has been largely misconceived, e.g., when it is said to involve "God's-eye view."

Adherents of realism and constructivism often misunderstand each other. Constructivists sometimes attack an old metaphysical theory that bears little similarity to the various "realisms" now held. Realists tend to interpret and criticize the idea of "constructing" the world on realist presuppositions, which renders it implausible from the beginning.

In this situation, it seems rather unfruitful to engage in the usual polemics, claiming that either realism or constructivism is to be rejected in all its aspects. It is more helpful first to clarify the statements of either side, to rule out some misunderstandings, and then to discuss anew some central epistemological problems associated with the realism-constructivism controversy.

2. What is construction and what is constructed?

Let us first analyze the idea of construction in order to find out why it is deemed absurd by many realists. Everybody knows what it means to construct a bridge or a road. We can also construct sentences by combining words, and theories by joining propositions. Constructivists generalize this idea so that all human cognition becomes a "constructive" process. In addition, the concept of construction is used to express the philosophical assumption that the world we can know is our construction (Glasersfeld 1997). But let us discuss this assumption later and first concentrate on the process of cognition.

When we open our eyes, we get the impression of being in immediate contact with a world of "outside" objects of various shapes and colors. However, philosophical reflection and empirical research suggest that things cannot be as simple: if we have cognitive access to the world at all, it is at least not as direct as it seems. Mental states such as perceptions and thoughts probably depend on brain states. And brain states are not in direct contact with physical objects. When external objects cause central brain states, a lot of physical and physiological events happen in between. Furthermore, the electrochemical processes in sense organs and the central brain processes caused by them are rather dissimilar to the "external" objects. From a psychological viewpoint, cognition also appears to be a rather complex process. It has been demonstrated in psychological experiments that previous knowledge, expectations, and values influence what we perceive and remember. Of course beliefs, theories, and conceptual models, which depend on perceptual results, are also constructions. And since people do not normally form beliefs in isolation but in comparison with other people, some philosophers and social scientists speak of "social construction" (Gergen 1999). The view presented so far can be summarized by the following thesis C1:

C1: Cognition is a constructive process.

Note that C1 is not in itself an antirealistic assumption. Most scientists accept C1. And I think that realists should accept it too. C1 does not logically exclude the possibility that our cognitive states represent facts from an independent world. However, some people consider C1 as a good reason for accepting the following antirealistic thesis:

C2: The world we can know is a construction. We cannot have knowledge about an independent reality, a world that exists and is structured independently of minds.

Constructivists who conceive of their position as an epistemological one hold C2. They usually do not present C1 and C2 as different assumptions. For our analysis, however, it is important to distinguish C1, which is based on *empirical results* of various sciences, from C2, which is a *philosophical* (not an empirical) hypothesis. I want to stress that many human and social scientists who consider themselves as constructivists are only interested in C1 (see, e.g., Mandler 1985).

But *is* C1 a sufficient reason for C2? Obviously, C1 does *not logically imply* C2. Though the causal chain connecting cognitive states with their physical objects may be rather long and complex, this does in no way exclude that these cognitive states present their objects exactly as they are. I want to stress this point because some people seem to think that the constructive character of cognition necessarily leads to an antirealistic view. This would be a false conclusion. Still, the question is whether our cognitive states do *in fact* represent real things as they are, and whether we can know this.

3. Is there an independent world?

Epistemological realism consists of two assumptions:

R1: There is an independent reality, that is, a world whose existence and structure is independent of minds.

R2: We can have knowledge about that independent reality.

The main reason in support of R1 is the fundamental experience that the world sometimes *resists* our attempts to describe and form it. Some of our attempts are successful while others are not. We can repeatedly expe-

rience the fact that we can pass an open door while is not possible to go straight through the wall. I can imagine things and change them in my mind. By contrast, if I look at this table in front of me I cannot, by mental effort alone, make it bigger or smaller. This experience of "resistance" suggests accepting the existence of something independent of our minds. There is something beyond consciousness, whatever it may be, that affects our cognitive efforts and actions by setting constraints. Kant therefore rejected Berkeley's idealism and accepted that there must be, in addition to phenomena, a world of *things-in-themselves*.

Constructivists do not generally object to R1. However, they reject R1 if the "independent world" is taken to be a *ready-made* world, i.e., a world in which it is fixed which things exist and which facts obtain. According to constructivism, how the world is divided into separate objects, properties, and facts depends on our concepts. Do realists believe in a ready-made world? R1 is not attached to any special ontological categories or assumptions. Some realists are nominalists, others believe in universals (e.g. Armstrong 1989); some are physicalists, some hold a dualist view. Yet realism requires that the independent world is *composed* or *structured* some way. The aspects of this structure may be unknown to us, yet the world is assumed to have its structure independently of minds, concepts, theories, or values.

Constructivists usually object that this assumption goes too far. Consider, however, the following question: Provided we have accepted that something exists that is mind-independent, how shall we conceive of this "something"? Is it sufficient to conceive of it as a structureless being? Or would it be more convincing to take it as something that is composed or structured a certain way? In my mind, the first assumption is insufficient. A world conceived of as completely structureless or homogeneous could not be the reason for our experiencing a manifoldness of things and events, and could not explain our experience of constraints. We would then have to conclude that the manifoldness of things is completely created by the subject, as assumed by idealism. In addition, we would have to postulate a mysterious connection between spiritual subjects, in order to explain the similarities in their perceptions. In short, the idea

of a structureless world leads back to idealism. Any reasonable view of the world seems to require that "things are some way," independently of minds. Again, this is not to say that we can know the real properties of things. Whenever I turn to the apple on this table I see green and when I turn to the book on the left side I see red. Perhaps the properties green and red do not exist beyond my mind. Yet things must be *somehow* if the similarities and differences in our perceptions have any real sources at all (Gadenne 2001).

There is the theory that objects do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. Concepts carve up the world into objects such as trees, apples, and stars. The world as we conceive of it depends on culture and language. Sapir and Whorf presented a lot of linguistic facts to support this view (Whorf 1984). Though the influence of language on thinking has been widely investigated, scientists still differ about how the empirical results should be interpreted (Anderson 2001). But let us assume that there were considerable differences between cultures concerning the way

THE AUTHOR
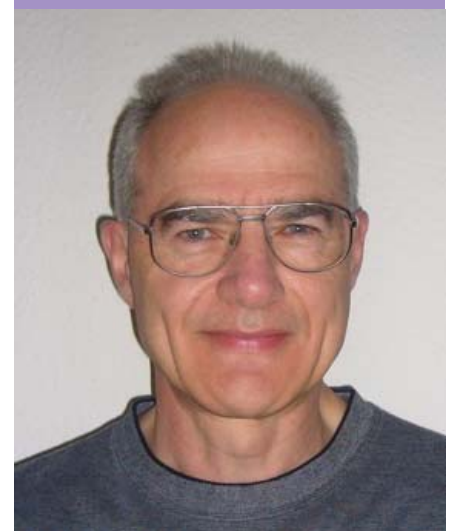
Volker Gadenne is professor of philosophy and theory of science. His research focuses on epistemological and methodological questions, the mind-body problem, and consciousness. Recent book publications include *Wirklichkeit, Bewusstsein und Erkenntnis* (2003) and *Philosophie der Psychologie* (2004).

the world is divided into objects, and into categories such as individual things, properties, and facts. Would this cast doubt on the realist assumption R1? I think the opposite is true: if there is a culture-dependent selective function of language, this can best be explained with the help of R1! For in order to develop concepts and apply them to things, these things must already have some properties, similarities, and differences that we are able to grasp. For example, it may depend on human interests that we distinguish meadows from forests. We could have developed totally different concepts that do not allow for that distinction. But we could not even *learn* and *apply* the concepts "meadow" and "forest," if the world were a structureless "something" without any observable features. Language cannot create such features, it can only influence which features we attend to and select in our perception and thinking.

4. It is possible to describe an independent world?

In his books *Das Jenseits der Philosophie* and *Die Flucht aus der Beliebigkeit* Josef Mitterer puts forward an argument against the realist assumption that we can refer, with the help of descriptions, to things as they really are. However, Mitterer not only criticizes realism but also constructivism and any "dualistic philosophy." By the latter he means a way of thinking and talking that presupposes certain dichotomic distinctions, e.g., between language and world, or subject and object. He argues for a non-dualizing manner of thinking and speaking. One of Mitterer's major concerns is to uncover and expose the underlying assumptions of dualistic thinking, including realism. Before exposing his criticism, he gives an intelligible introduction to realism, rich in subtle distinctions. He characterizes the central assumptions and arguments in great detail. I fully agree with this reconstruction and would like to recommend that every realist should read it in order to learn some new aspects of this view. I now want to present and discuss one of his objections, and deal with non-dualism in general in section 9.

The question at issue is whether we are able to test a hypothesis about an object in such a way that whether our hypothesis is confirmed or refuted depends on the object. For example, someone says, "This table consists of plastic" (H1), and someone else objects, "This table consists of wood" (H2). Mitterer (2001, p. 96) now goes on to assume that the first person passes her hand over the tabletop with the result that she gets a splinter in her hand. She now changes her mind, gives up H1 and accepts H2.

Interestingly, however, Mitterer does not think this change of mind was determined by the properties of the real table. Here is the central point of his argument:

"In order to falsify the first hypothesis in the dualistic sense we have to refer to that part of reality the falsification of the first hypothesis is said to be due to. And this reference is only possible with the help of the second hypothesis which is now presupposed as true […] It is not a table existing beyond discourse that decides about truth and falsity: one decides about the truth or falsity of the first description on the bases of the second description which is thereby presupposed as true" (p. 97).

Mitterer concludes that the distinction between an object and its description, which characterizes dualistic philosophy, necessarily fails. But isn't a table different from its description? For example, the table may consist of wood while the description does not. Here is Mitterer's comment:

"I can distinguish the table from the description of the table by describing it (again) and describing the description of the table.

However, the object of this (these) description(s) is not the table but the table *and* the description of the table. We are again in a situation in which we cannot distinguish the object of the description from the description of the object" (p. 98).

Mitterer thinks that the person in his example decides about the falsification of H1 on the basis of H2, which is, for that purpose, presupposed as true. However, his example rather suggests another interpretation: the person who gives up H1 does not say something like, "H1 is false *because* H2 is true." She rather argues as follows: "I just made an observation (getting a splinter) that contradicts H1 but is in accordance with H2." That is, H1 is rejected *because of an experience* and *not* just because of a rival hypothesis that is presupposed without any empirical evidence. The person accepts H2 *after* having made her observation contradicting H1 and confirming H2.

Moreover, one needs neither H1 nor H2 to *refer* to the table in our example. People can refer to objects by pointing to them. And our perceptions are directed to objects before we learn to describe them.

I do not understand why Mitterer thinks we cannot distinguish descriptions from objects. First, we can refer to objects without using descriptions at all. Second, *using* a description is not the same, and does not imply, *talking about* a description. Let D1 be a description of a table. Assume we talk about D1, on the one hand, and the table, on the other hand, taking them as different things. We therefore use two further descriptions D3 and D4, where D3 has D1 as its object, and D4 refers to the table. Note that we here *use* D3 to refer to a description, and D4 to refer to the table (not to a description).

But Mitterer somehow thinks that we are locked in descriptions: any attempt of going beyond our system of descriptions yields further descriptions. Similarly, philosophers have claimed that there is no way out of the cage of our minds, of language, or of our brain processes. Mitterer is not an idealist, and constructivists are not idealists either. Yet it seems to me that they were influenced by Berkeley's famous argument (see his "Principles of human knowledge," §23). This argument runs as follows: in order to conceive or think of an object, we have to have it in mind. However, what we have in mind are only ideas; outside objects are, by definition, *not in* our minds. Therefore, we cannot even think of outside objects. We cannot think of something unthought-of.

Though this argument is invalid, it greatly influenced Kant and generations of philosophers. The decisive point is that the expression "having something in mind" can mean two different things. It can mean, first, that a certain sensation or idea is part of a person's mind. In this case, what we have in mind is, by definition, some mental state or event. But "having something in mind" also means that a perception or thought is *directed toward* an object x. And in this case x can either be a mental state or an outside object. While an idea is never itself an outside object, it may be directed toward an outside object. And in the

latter sense, we can have an outside object "in mind" though it is not part of the mind in the same way that an idea is. If these two things are confused, one may erroneously conclude that it is logically impossible even to think of, or refer to, mind-independent objects (for a more detailed analysis see Musgrave 1999, pp. 177–184).

Of course this does not prove that we can in fact think of mind-independent objects. It only proves that the view that we cannot think of things outside our minds is not an analytical truth. The opposite view, held by realists, is not an analytical truth either. The question of whether we can describe and have knowledge about an independent world cannot be answered a priori.

5. Can we have knowledge about an independent world?

R2 states that we can know real objects and facts. This is the claim mainly criticized by constructivism. And it is also a claim that has given rise to various misunderstandings. What does it mean to "know" something? According to the traditional view of knowledge, it means to have justified true belief. And justification was traditionally understood as something that gives a belief certainty (Albert 1968). Having knowledge about some real facts then amounts to knowing these facts with certainty. Now certainty about external objects and facts seems to presuppose that we have immediate cognitive access to the real things. If cognitive states are somehow mediated or constructed, there is always room for skeptical doubt. Only if our minds were in unmediated contact with reality, could we be sure that our cognitive states grasp reality as it is. Putnam called this "God's-eye view" and many critics of realism believe that this is what realists have in mind when they claim to know how real things are. Again and again antirealists have pointed out that we cannot have knowledge in this sense, not even in science: scientific theories may be empirically most successful, yet reality might be quite different from what these theories state.

To all this realists have to agree. And they usually do. Of course knowledge is con-structed in some sense, and mediated by language. And it can never reach certainty. Neither experience nor reasoning can give a guarantee that a statement is true. *Fallibilism* is now accepted by nearly all philosophers and scientists. It follows from this that humans cannot have knowledge at all, if knowledge implies certainty. (By the way, this holds also for beliefs about the world as experienced by us, for we can never be sure whether we remember our experiences correctly, and what experiences we will have in the next moment.) But we *can* have knowledge if justification is understood as something that need not guarantee truth: according to fallibilistic realism a belief is justified if it has withstood serious criticism (Musgrave 1999, p. 324).

As to beliefs about real objects and facts, criticism means critical empirical testing. Most contemporary realists accept some version of the hypothetico-deductive method. For example, let H1 be the hypothesis, "The earth is round," and H2 the former view, "The earth is flat." There are many observational results confirming H1 and refuting H2. From a realistic viewpoint, it is, in such a case, justified to assume that H1 is true and H2 is false.

Generally, assume that some question has been raised and one or several hypotheses have been given as answers. We test these hypotheses against each other. If we succeed in demonstrating that one of these hypotheses, say, H, accounts for the empirical results quite well while all others do not, we are justified in adopting H as true. The acceptance is preliminary, since H may be refuted in further tests.

Many (but not all) realists hold to the *correspondence theory of truth*: A statement is true if what it states is actually the case; otherwise it is false. In other words, a statement is true if the state of affairs it describes actually obtains. Ideally, whether a statement is true or false should only depend on the facts. However, since concepts are never totally precise, it also depends on criteria related to human interests. For example, is it true that the earth is spherical? Yes, if the problem at stake is to point out the falsity of the former view that the earth is flat. No, if we are to exactly describe the shape of the earth. Many statements are only *approximately true*. It is approximately true that in 2007 the world population was 6.6 billion. And whether a statement is regarded as true or false depends on what deviations should count as substantial. Even in the exact sciences, we usually deal with approximate truth. Scientific theories often contain *ideal models*, e.g., "mass point," "frictionless pendulum," or "rational person." But if, for example, planets are described as mass points moving on elliptic orbits, that cannot be exactly true since no planet is really a mass point. Yet the statement is approximately true.

What reasons are there in support of R2? The main reason is that some of our assumptions are empirically and practically successful while others are not. My belief that I can pass through an open door but cannot go directly through the wall leads to an empirically adequate prediction and successful action. It seems that this belief somehow corresponds to the properties of an independent reality.

Science elaborates and deepens ordinary knowledge. Theories such as those about atoms or genes have high explanatory power and are extremely successful in predicting new events. They even lead to the discovery of new entities and laws. Could such theories function so well if they did not (approximately) correspond to some real characteristics of the world, even if they describe the structure of things imperfectly and not in full detail? Admittedly, empirical confirmation is not a guarantee of the truth of a theory. But this is already taken into account by accepting the fallibilistic principle: hypotheses are put forward with the intention to refer to, and describe, real things, with the proviso that reference as well as description may fail. Realists think it is not necessary to give up the natural realistic attitude as long as we are aware of the uncertainty and the limits of human cognition.

Constructivism instead tries to account for the constructive character and the uncertainty of knowledge, by *changing the object* of our beliefs and statements: not the real world but only the world as experienced is said to be the object of cognition. This seems to be an even more radical way of dealing with the limits of human cognition than fallibilistic realism. But does it lead to a more satisfactory solution? We shall see that constructivism gets into trouble just because it is too radical. Instead of solving the problems even better than fallibilistic realism, it creates new ones.

6. Is constructivism self-refuting?

Constructivism has been accused of being *self-refuting*: the assumptions constructivism starts with are not consistent with the consequences accepted in the end. One starts with assumptions concerning the biological and cognitive properties of humans, and the way they construct their views. If these assumptions are to be relevant for any epistemological considerations, they have to be interpreted in a realistic way, that is, as knowledge about the real constructing systems, be they single persons, groups of persons, or brains. But constructivism denies that we can have knowledge about real things, including persons and brains. Hence constructivism contradicts itself since it presupposes realism at the beginning and rejects it in the end (see Wendel 1990).

Now there are two possibilities for avoiding a self-refutation. Constructivists can either maintain that we cannot have knowledge of the real world, not even of the agents or systems that construct the world they experience. Or they can restrict the constructivist claim to a class of things that does not include the constructing agents. It is, for example, coherent to claim that real persons construct mathematical objects, or universals, or "theoretical entities," such as quarks.

However, constructivism as a general view of knowledge cannot solve the problem the second way. According to this view, not only are electrons and quarks constructed, but also perceptual objects such as tables, chairs, trees, people, social institutions, and brains. If we cannot have knowledge about these things as they really are, how could we have such knowledge about real persons and their constructive activities? If stones, plants, and cats are constructions, persons and brains should be constructions, too. Most people have never seen a brain, let alone the processes happening in brains. And how could we know something about real brain processes or the real social behavior of people if we didn't know anything about the rest of the real world?

The first possible way to avoid a self-refutation does not help either since it undermines the constructivist position. If what we assume about people, their brains, and cognitive processes is not taken as knowledge in the realistic sense, it is hard to see why these assumptions should be relevant for any epistemological conclusions. The radical constructivist Gerhard Roth (1994) discussed this dilemma in great detail. According to his view, it is the brain that does the construction of the world. Roth distinguishes the real from the phenomenal brain. The brain that does the construction of the world is the real one, not the phenomenal one. The latter is itself a construction. Neuroscience can only study the phenomenal brain while the real brain is unknown to everybody.

Now Roth has to answer the question of how he can know the things just stated if we cannot know anything about the real world. Shouldn't he have to concede that he couldn't know it but just assumes it without justification? However, Roth wants to save some minimal justification for his theory. He says that his theory does not claim objective validity or truth, but "plausibility" and "internal consistency" (1994, p. 326). He is right that his theory is consistent. But what does it mean that it is "plausible"? It seems that Roth claims at least some minimal justification for the story told above, according to which there is a real brain that constructs the world. Then, however, Roth assumes to know something about the real brain and his view is a version of realism. As a realist, he can keep C1 but should give up C2.

As stated above, local constructivism, that is, constructivism restricted to a special class of things, does not necessarily get into trouble. But general constructivism does. As far as I see, nobody has so far given a convincing answer to this problem.

7. Does constructivism allow for more freedom?

Some constructivists seem to think that their view helps people realize that they are free to create things and change them if necessary. By contrast, realism is said to foster a passive or pessimistic attitude, according to the slogan: "Things have to stay as they are since the constraints of reality do now allow for any change." However, if we realize that the whole world is our construction, we should become convinced that we can reconstruct it if we want to.

The social constructivist Gergen explains this with the help of some examples, and he appears to be rather optimistic: "We must suppose that everything we have learned about our world and ourselves – that gravity holds us to the earth, people cannot fly like birds, cancer kills, or that punishment deters bad behavior – could be otherwise […]; we could use our language to construct alternative worlds in which there is no gravity or cancer, or in which persons and birds are equivalent, and punishment adored" (Gergen 1999, p. 47).

Realism indeed assumes that there are laws of nature, such as the law of gravity cited by Gergen. Since we cannot annihilate or modify such laws they do in fact set limits for our actions. If it is a law that A is followed by B, there will never occur an event of the form "A and non-B," and we can by no means make such an event happen. However, the laws of nature allow for many events and changes, so that we can create or modify a lot of things, if we have the technical means to do so. We can try to create A in order to make B happen. Knowledge about laws is very helpful for that purpose. Exactly speaking, any purposive behavior presupposes some law. If we did not believe in laws, we would never use a hotplate or take a plane. Thus it is true that, in a certain sense, laws of nature restrict our freedom of action. Yet knowledge about these laws helps us to render our freedom of action as great as possible.

Moreover, when it seems that reality sets certain constraints on our actions, a realist need not consider these constraints as ultimate. Since knowledge about reality is fallible, it might turn out that some hypotheses regarded as laws are false. Or it might turn out that some empirical generalizations don't describe laws but only regularities, holding under boundary conditions that could be changed.

If we now consider again Gergen's examples, we can say that some of the things he announces might be possible. That cancer kills would stop to be a regularity if someone found an effective medicine. That people cannot fly was generally true before they constructed airplanes, and so on. Note however that humans have managed to do these things just *because* they discovered some laws of nature, and used them to change reality in accordance with their goals.

All this is possible on the basis of realism. Is there anything constructivism could con-

tribute over and above these possibilities? Gergen suggests that we use our language to construct new worlds. Of course language is helpful for social interaction and necessary for scientific research. But does Gergen think we could change the world merely by inventing new concepts? We could, for example, eliminate all concepts that refer to cancer. But would this really enhance our freedom, or help anybody? Does Gergen perhaps believe that we could construct anything? Most constructivists do not assume this.

It turns out that realism and constructivism do not differ greatly in respect to our freedom of action. They both agree that many things can be created and changed. They also agree that humans cannot do anything. And they agree that we have to find out what we can do by testing empirical hypotheses and learning by mistakes. Note also that, from the viewpoint of fallibilistic realism, we have reason to ask critically whether hypotheses so far considered as laws are really laws, in order to prevent our being restricted or mislead by false assumptions.

8. Does realism serve the interests of power?

Some people suspect realism of being in alliance with the powerful. With reference to Nietzsche and French postmodernism, Gergen (1999, pp. 223f.) discusses this "dark" side of realism, coming to the conclusion that we should refuse any discourse based on the ideas of truth or reality: when we appeal to "the true" or "the real," we eliminate competing voices from dialogue and terminate discussion. If what we say is deemed "true," the views of the others are disqualified as "false." Concepts like "true" and "real" are used to execute power, to enforce one's own position, and put down other positions.

Mitterer, too, thinks there is a relation between realism and power. He concedes, however, that philosophers never intended to serve the interests of the powerful when they declared the truth to be the aim of science and philosophy. Nevertheless he believes that, in the end, those who commit themselves to truth have to appeal to authority. Since reality does not itself tell us what is true or false, the realist must try to "personalize" the view of her opponent, and "depersonalize" her own

view. One does this by saying, "My statement is 'objective' and 'true', yours is only a subjective, mistaken opinion'" (Mitterer 2001, p. 91).

Now I do not doubt that people sometimes hold certain dogmatic views that serve their interests. And people have always tried to maintain their power by oppressing any criticism. There is, furthermore, persuasion, prejudice, and there is deception, even in science. However, I vehemently deny that realism has anything to do with this.

Is it possible at all to persuade or intimidate people by using predicates like "true" or "real"? Yes, it is, *if these concepts are used in an antirealistic sense*. Such strategies attributed to realists by Gergen can only be effective if "true" or "real" are predicates that could give a statement justification, and this is exactly what realism denies. Assume I say A, and my opponent contradicts. If I now added, "A is true," or "A corresponds to reality," I would not in the least enhance the justification or plausibility of A. According to realism, the statement "A is true" is exactly as justified as A itself. In order to convince someone, I would have to give reasons or evidence, e.g., some empirical results in favor of A. The concepts of truth and reality do not serve to justify statements but to make clear how certain statements are to be understood with respect to their relation to the world, namely as descriptions (and not, e.g., as fiction or joke). Again, people do sometimes try to make others believe something by saying, "I'm right," or "What I say is true." From a realistic viewpoint, this is persuasion without reason. It is also true that fundamentalistic schools like to declare their own doctrine as the "truth." But this not realism. Realism is not responsible for the misuse of concepts by people who hold irrational thoughts, or who try to persuade others by misleading them.

9. Is non-dualism an alternative?

I have tried to present a version of realism that can be defended against constructivist objections. This realism is not opposed to the idea that cognition is a constructive process. According to this view, reality is something we presuppose in any attempt to attain knowledge though we can never be certain how

things really are. Having knowledge then amounts to the preliminary judgment that some hypotheses seem to correspond to reality better than others. In addition, I have tried to demonstrate that a constructivist position that reduces the claim to knowledge even further does not solve the problems better but creates new ones.

The traditional problems of knowledge are deeply rooted in the idea that there are subjects whose mental states are directed towards objects. Some philosophers think there is something wrong with this idea. They have developed a new approach in order to overcome and avoid the difficulties of both realism, constructivism, and any "dualistic" thinking. With reference to Mitterer, Schmidt (2003), too, holds a non-dualizing view. I cannot deal here with this approach in detail but want to make some remarks on Mitterer's (2000, 2001) non-dualizing philosophy.

"Dualism" here means a way of thinking and talking that presupposes certain dichotomic distinctions, e.g., between language and world, or subject and object. "In the dualistic way of speaking, descriptions are always descriptions of *something*, of an object, an event, a state of affairs, where the *something* the description refers to [...] is different from the description, that is, from language" (Mitterer 2000, p. 55). By contrast, in non-dualizing thinking things are (parts of) descriptions: "The object of description is not different from description or language, it is that part of the description that has already been performed" (p. 56).

Assume, for example, that we want to describe the table in the corner. "The table in the corner" is the description *so far*, the description to be continued. This description *so far* is followed by a description *from now on*, say, "The table in the corner has four legs." We now have a new object for an even further description *from now on*, namely, the new description *so far*, "The table in the corner with four legs." The next description might be, "The table in the corner with four legs is brown," and so on. Any description yields a new object for further descriptions, or rather, it *is* that object. But the descriptions *from now on* never *refer* to the descriptions *so far* as their objects, they rather take them as their starting point.

Non-dualizing philosophy dispenses with a "beyond" of statements or descriptions.

Here, too, hypotheses are put forward and tested. But tests and arguments no longer refer to something different from statements or descriptions. "Views are true because and as long as we adopt them" (2001, p. 105). "Reality" is just "those views accepted at the time being" (p. 105).

Is this a plausible view? I am sure anybody can make descriptions the way Mitterer proposes: we can formulate a descriptive statement and then take it as a starting point for a further description. We may call our last description the "description so far," and our next one the "description from now on." However, Mitterer does not tell us the whole story, he leaves out an important point: in order to proceed as he proposes, *we also have to refer to objects*, such as tables, which are neither descriptive statements nor descriptions (in the sense of characterizations). Consider again Mitterer's example. The description *so far*, "The table in the corner," does not itself tell me that this table has four legs, or that its

color is brown. Thus, in order to continue the description *so far*, and formulate the next description *from now on*, one has to attend to a *non-linguistic object*, and observe its properties. There is no other way a description could be performed. This is at least how people normally conceive of a *description*, in contrast to fiction or fantasy. And I don't think Mitterer wants to propose that we should invent the properties we ascribe to things.

As to the "dualistic" distinction between subject and object, I think it corresponds to a fundamental feature of anybody's experience. When I see something, it seems to me that there is an object in front of me. When I think of something, I am related to an object different from me. The mental life of people is characterized by *intentional* states, by states of subjects directed to objects. These objects might be conceived of as real, or phenomenal, or constructed. We cannot by decision or convention stop experiencing the world that way. There is one exception. Mystics are said to

have been in states in which they experienced a unity between their own consciousness and the world. However, even mystics are not normally in such states, and they usually emphasize that such experiences could not be described in words, for the very reason that descriptive statements always presuppose the distinction between objects, and between the speaker and the world.

Of course not every philosophical theory has to deal with the intentional relation. But if a new philosophical approach suggests giving up the traditional, "dualistic" distinction between subject and object, it has to solve the problem of how to account for the intentionality of the mental. Non-dualists will probably answer that the view of the mental as intentional is itself a construction, like any other philosophical hypothesis. But constructions can be more or less convincing, and it seems to me that non-dualism is not much in accordance with the most fundamental trait of human experience.

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