

Final Perspective Paper

These days, when class material mirrors the personal views of the professor, they are usually quick to say that class grades are in no way dependent on agreement with their beliefs. But in a class such as this one, whose goal is nothing short of expanding its students' views on perception, it's difficult to distinguish our views from what was laid down so skillfully in lecture. The class was so perfect that my only regret is not writing a lie into my initial perspective paper - a staunch defense of materialism - to make for a more dramatic and exciting final paper. In reality, my views on perception have not changed much since our first paper, and though they have been challenged and have evolved accordingly, I am still a metaphysical constructivist. I made this choice mostly because there are some reservations that I have about idealism that I think need to be expressed. So this paper will not be about how my beliefs changed over the course of the semester, but rather how they were strengthened by the readings and discussion.

From the very first day of lecture, the idea of constructivism was logically appealing to me. Its flexibility in allowing both the comfort of a real, physical world independent of human consciousness and the influence of input and modification from that same human consciousness seemed to be the best of both worlds. In constructivism, there could still be a universal *right* and *wrong* (I'm going to denote universal right and wrong with italics for the rest of the paper), even if these, like all perceptions, could be biased through individual perception. At some theoretical point, all perception could be the same, and humans could all agree in a massive show of

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validation: "Everyone saw what I saw, *I* must be right" (I'll explore this phenomenon more later). But constructivism could also account for the individual variation that just seems so

commonplace to anyone who has spent time arguing with another human: “We saw the same thing, how can you say it was different that what I say it was?”

Constructivism is comforting in that it equally explains both of these cases - disagreements can lead to differing viewpoints, but both parties involved can rest assured that there is a true *right* and *wrong* and if they are on the side of the majority opinion (or perhaps the side of majority of experts), they are *right*.

And, yes, it is rather petty that, after thinking about it for a semester, the main reason why constructivism is appealing to me is that it allows me to be right in an argument. But exactly why I feel this way is an interesting story, and one that we covered briefly in class.

Professor Pachella was discussing the challenges of raising children without indoctrinating them in the world of materialism. The example that Professor Pachella gave was of his son, now a large, masculine teenager. Only a few years ago, this same son had a habit of playing with stuffed animals. He would carry out lengthy conversations with his stuffed animals, patiently discussing with them which animal would get to spend the night in his bed - in short, he considered them his friends. Now, it would be all too typical for parents to discourage this kind of play, to try and enforce a world without alternate realities. In fact, this is what many primary school systems do when they indoctrinate their students into a world of scientism and materialism.

In this world, science is taken to be a cultural value. Objectivity is taken to be a standard requirement for survival, and it is practiced faithfully by our new band of unbiased priests, the

scientists. Creativity is not as valued as logic and algorithmic deduction. Human consciousness

and perception are seen to have arisen out of the material world, not the other way around as taught in metaphysical idealism. Magic has been removed from our dialect; every question has an absolute answer. This is the world of materialism and scientism, where there *are* such things as a universal right and wrong.

This was the world in which I was raised. My upbringing is my excuse for wanting to tap into a universal right. The story of the relationship between my own perceptions and reality was written largely by my educational background and culture. The thing is, my childhood was nothing out of the ordinary. I'm certain that the vast majority of children experienced the universal right, usually wielded by their parents or other authority figures, that won every argument and made the difference between going to bed early and staying up late, between getting an ice cream cone and saving your appetite for dinner (and on and on). When presented with such power, what child wouldn't want to be *right*?

We can gain this universal right by going to college, gaining experience, becoming an 'expert' in your field, gathering consensus, and, perhaps most importantly, growing up. It's the reason why I'm in college - to earn the ability to discuss Neuroscience and Psychology at will, knowing that I am *right* because I gained experience through four years of classes, gathered consensus by proposing an honors thesis, and became an 'expert' through study with already well-established experts like Dr. Mohammed Akaaboune.

And, as petty as I sound, I'm sure that I am not alone on this college campus - because materialism has become a socialized cultural value, many of us seek to become validated by society and their peers - to become *experts*. Walker Percy talked about the dangers of relying on

experts in “The Loss of the Creature” - if we surrender our ability and willingness to experience life in our ordinary, non-expert state, we surrender our very sovereignty as human beings. We should not give up something as essential to life as a human as our own perception; we need to get *out there* and perceive things without worrying about if an expert considers our perceptions right or wrong.

This universal right relies upon something very basic, something very important to experts and experts-in-training alike: the existence of an absolute external reality. Without an objective world whose existence cannot itself be altered by mere human perception, our fundamental notion of a universal right and wrong, of any universal truth whatsoever, disappears. The world of idealism, where individual perception itself creates the world experienced by the individual, is a world of relative right and wrong, of truth relative to the individual.

For the individual who needs to be validated, who needs the ability, through expertise, to be fundamentally right, the world of idealism is a very scary world indeed. Let me be perfectly honest - it's scary for me as well. Thankfully, the middle ground of constructivism allows for the existence of an external reality, for the possibility, however slight, of a universal right and wrong, of a truth that is accurate regardless of human perception.

Although not as frightening as idealism, constructivism still presents a substantial problem for me - how can my perceptions and experiences become validated if everyone more or less has a fundamentally different perception? How can you gain consensus in a constructivist world? The answer lies in the Alternative Model.

Learning about the Alternative Model's story of the birth of *language* - the Fable of the Cavepersons - and its basic differences from what Professor Pachella termed *mere communication* was an enlightening experience, to say the least. It was such a revelation that I immediately related the fable to my girlfriend (now my ex, but she didn't really appreciate or understand the story) and my best friend (who reacted with just the kind of amazement that I wanted).

The real function of the Fable of the Cavepersons is to distinguish between what is language and what is just Skinnerian repetition. I could write down word for word the exact lecture that I received from Professor Pachella about this difference, but this would just be repetition, just mere communication, instead of language. For language to take place, I would have to give the reader the impression that I understood the meaning of the lecture by writing it down in my own words, though still taking care to protect and convey its original intent. It is this process, when a lecturer gives his message and the pupil shows that he or she can *understand* the message that embodies true language; this sending and receiving of the correct message is what separates humans from the other animals.

The Alternative Model takes language a step further: Humans *need* this sending and receiving of understanding for the same reason why people want to be experts - shared experience and understanding validates our existence.

The example given in class was that of a rainbow. Now, we all know what a rainbow looks like, but if you were to perceive a rainbow for the very first time with no prior rainbow exposure whatsoever, it would be natural to consider it a hallucination. And the best, most

common way to find out for sure if the rainbow is real is simple: *ask someone*.

Now, we don't quite phrase our validations as such (it isn't normal to ask someone on the subway to validate your perceptual experiences), but the following phrases are common, "I may be crazy, but do you see that colorful horseshoe-shaped thing in the sky," and, "Is it just me or is it hot in here," and finally, "I might be wrong, but I think that *Since I Left You* by The Avalanches is the best breakup album ever made."

Now that last phrase is the really interesting one - humans don't just request validation when they see odd, maybe hallucinatory, colorful things in the sky, *we request validation all of the time*. Every sentence that begins with, "I think..." is a request, a hope for validation sent into the abyss of humanity, wishing for someone to respond, "I think the same thing!" and validate your beliefs. We thirst for this link of language. We yearn to be *right*, even if it is only in the opinion of one other person.

And this is why constructivism and the Alternative Model are both so appealing to me. My desire for expertise, for winning arguments, validation, and chasing what is universally right is still possible, and the pathway to my goal is now fully illuminated: we seek to be right through language and understanding.

So, my position as a metaphysical constructivist was well cemented, but that's not to say that I didn't have challenges over the semester. The first came from a comment left on my initial perspective paper, the second from the writings of Gibson.

The comment was: "Do contrasting perceptions between individuals truly refute the

notion of a reality independent of consciousness?" Now, to a constructivist, they wouldn't. Contrasting perceptions are a normal part of human existence, and more signify the sacred, sovereign, and individual nature of perception. To an idealist, whose reality is actively constructed by their perception, a reality independent of consciousness is ruled out precisely because of our contrasting perceptions.

The problem wasn't with the comment, it was what I took to be its implication - how is a universal right, the true perception of the reality unbiased by consciousness really determined? Using language to validate a perception accomplishes just that - the perception is validated, but the result is a bit lackluster - one other person shares your perception. But what about reality, what about *right* and *wrong*? How are those determined? Can one still be truly *right* if nobody shares their perception? Is *right* simply determined by the majority of individuals? Can the relativistic nature of perception for one person translate into a relative nature of perception for an entire society - cultural relativism of *right* and *wrong*?

The sobering conclusion I arrived at is that, if the perceptions of all of humanity are individual and have the potential for bias, *there's no way for us to ever know the nature of true reality*. Even if everyone perceives the exact same thing at the same time and place, we could all be unanimous in error.

Damn. There goes my hope for an absolute, objective validation, tapping through to the perception of true reality. All I have left is the hope that my perceptions mirror reality, that my consciousness is unbiased and noninfluencing, and that I have had a brush with the true *right*.

In the meantime, I'll settle for the validation that I get through language and shared e

experience. If I'm wrong, and I mean *wrong*, at least I am not alone in my mistake. I know that this is not a rock-solid justification of my belief in constructivism, and I know that it's just settling for the most comfortable, defensible position. But, realistically, I aimed for something pretty lofty - universal truth is about as lofty of a goal as one could get, and I'm not dissatisfied that I wound up with a majority agreement of experience instead.

To be honest, the mere possibility, (as some would say, the illusion) that my perception mirrors reality is enough solace for me. Having no possibility whatsoever would be uncomfortable, to say the least.

And in the complete opposite direction, I had a brief flirtation with the theories of visual perception by James Gibson and psychophysical materialism. Over the course of a week, I listened in awe as Gibson's direct perception drove a stake through the heart of enrichment theories like my beloved constructivism. In Gibson's theory, there is no need for the meddling influence of proximal receptors - perception comes into the mind, unfiltered, from the environment.

The more and more I listened, the more that direct perception explained the illusions of depth perception and differences in contrast. Talking of the senses as systems was, if nothing new, a logical way of explaining perception. It was all making so much sense that I told Professor Pachella that I was worried that direct perception would take the place of my beloved constructivism.

Thankfully, in constructivism's saving grace, Gibson's variables don't explain all of the

interesting and everyday variations in perception. Gibson's theory of depth perception in no way describes how a referee will scream foul when everyone in the park saw the ball fly fair. And it's downright insulting to claim that the difference was caused by the ref not actively 'looking', or that he was not moving - none of these have any effect on the great divide between fair and foul. Gibson also does a poor job of explaining the effects of expectation on perception that enrichment theories cover so well. The fact is, differences between the perceptions of individuals happen all of the time, and just can't be explained by mere direct perception. Constructivism, at least in my eyes, was saved.

So, there you have it. My position of metaphysical constructivism is neither concrete nor universally accepted (after all, what theory of perception is?), but I am comfortable with it, and my belief in it was sufficiently strong to fend off two major challenges. As with anybody, my opinions on perception and reality were born out of my educational background and culture. But the cultural value to seek to be *right* that I was initially ashamed of turned into a desire for mutual understanding and language that I take to be quite beautiful. And if I have learned one thing from this class it's that, regardless of my agreement or disagreement with Professor Pachella on this paper, differences in human perception are natural, as long as somewhere, deep in our hearts, we can share a true understanding through language.