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Nelson Goodman's Starmaking Philosophy Revisited

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> Abstract • I provide a brief account of key elements in Nelson Goodman's starmaking constructivist philosophy and comment on Bin Liu's defense of Goodman in the context of contemporary constructivist philosophy.

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« 1 » Among Nelson Goodman's ongoing interests are issues pertaining to starmaking philosophy. In his target article, Bin Liu defends Goodman's starmaking theory by investigating the problem of stuff. This question concerns whether Goodman's starmaking philosophy requires unconstructed stuff.

« 2 » According to Goodman, there are many, even conflicting "right" versions of the world, as he discusses in *Ways of Worldmaking* (Goodman 1978). Goodman also acknowledged "wrong" versions of the world, which he referred to as versions that are not well made. A major portion of his work was to differentiate among the various types of symbols according to their syntactic and semantic features and to sort out their respective contributions to knowledge.

« 3 » Goodman recognized the need for something more than ordinary language to interpret a world and establish a reliable philosophy. Yet he believed that verbal analysis and logical construction were complementary rather than incompatible means. He applied the newly developed formal techniques of symbolic logic in his first book, *The Structure of Appearance* (1951), where he developed a number of different calculi. However, he insisted that logical precision and systematization do not depend on the use of any particular technique. For instance, the vocabulary begins with terms from ordinary language and proceeds systematically to clear away confusion by making increasingly fine distinctions and developing the connections necessary to advance the understanding of symbol systems. Precision is achieved through technical applications restricting the use of terms found in ordinary language, purged of their ambiguities and vagueness, for use in a system where new connections can be forged.

« 4 » Goodman's philosophical theories encompass nominalism, constructivism, and a version of radical relativism:

- As a nominalist, he finds the notion of nonindividuals (classes) unintelligible.
- As a constructivist, he employs abstract logical symbols to engage in systematic philosophical mapmaking to organize the qualities and particulars of experience into knowledge.
- Relativism supports his view that there are many coexisting right *ways of worldmaking*.

« 5 » A statement in the foreword of his book, *Ways of Worldmaking*, states concisely the radical nature of his approach to philosophical concerns.

" Few familiar philosophical labels fit comfortably, a book that is at odds with rationalism and empiricism alike, with materialism and idealism, with mechanism and vitalism, with mysticism and scientism, and with most other ardent doctrines. " (Goodman 1978: x)

« 6 » He envisioned his work as a part of the mainstream of modern philosophy. Yet he proposed to replace the views of major theorists (Immanuel Kant on the structure of the mind and C. I. Lewis on the structure of concepts) with his own theory of symbol systems.

« 7 » *The Structure of Appearance* (1951), Goodman's first major book, provides a general theory of experience and with limited attention to the construction of systems. He applies the part–whole logic previewed in his dissertation to create a phenomenalist system using qualia as primitives.

« 8 » In *Ways of Worldmaking*, Goodman sets forth what is perhaps his most radical claim: that symbol-making activities constitute worldmaking, and that there is no single fixed or "objective" world apart from these versions constructed through languages, the sciences, the arts, and other symbol-making processes. "World" in Goodman's terms refers to "right world versions" and at times to what is referred to by these world versions. His key argument is that, apart from symbolic frames of reference, we have nothing else with which to compare versions. What then are Goodman's criteria to judge the rightness of a world? It is difficult to find a definitive answer concerning the rightness of a world apart from the claim that rightness depends on: Constancy, consistency, relevance and informativeness (Goodman & Elgin 1988: 12).

« 9 » Goodman's criteria for judging symbols, whether in the sciences or the other forms of knowledge, depends on how well a symbol system serves its cognitive purposes: "how it analyzes, sorts, orders, and organizes" and how the symbols participate in the making and transformation of knowledge (Goodman 1968: 5–19).

« 10 » In his target article, Bin Liu offers a defense of Goodman's constructivism, referred to here as "starmaking constructivism." Liu argues that a full understanding of Goodman's views on constructivism does not support Goodman's theory of starmaking as a "cookie-cutter constructivism" which would entail the presence of "stuff"

267

(§2) Liu argues that a constructivism-friendly world view offers a way for constructivists to address "the problem of stuff" (ibid).

« 11 » Liu finds in Goodman's works a line of argument as follows: First, in talking about stars, we use language to refer or to construct stars or whatever else we are talking about. Secondly, Liu, reminds us that Goodman views all features as constructed features in the sense that they are dependent on language or some form of symbol-making process. It follows for Goodman that entities such as stars or constellations are versions consisting of the language components employed in their construction.

« 12 » In his effort to support Goodman's views concerning the construction of stars, Liu considers three arguments pertinent to Goodman's views:

- Features of stars qua stars are constructed from our use of language or other symbols that are used and accepted for such purposes and resulting in right versions: "Right versions construct worlds" (§3).
- "All features are constructed" (§9) thus allowing that no features are independent of linguistic versions.
- That the removal of all constructed features results in nothing being left (§10).

« 13 » Liu defends Goodman's account of constructivism as credible, when understood in the context of a version of constructivism that would remove substance and metaphysical unifying devices, with a substratum without properties but with the possibility that properties can be attached.

« 14 » Liu proceeds to develop his own defense of a constructivist world view with his account of a modified version of Goodman's starmaking world view. He proposes an account of constructivism that does not include stuff in the sense that it would pose problems for Goodman's or other constructivist world views. A key element in Liu's argument is that "objects" such as stars gain their properties through a gradual process of accumulation where properties are gathered in bundles linked to what are commonly called objects (§14). Key to the argument is the claim that in a constructivist world view "the construction process of objects, such as […] stars, is that the construction of a bundle of properties is a process of [accumulating linguistic or other symbolic

properties] rather than a process of cutting" (§32).

« 15 » There is one issue in particular that calls for further clarification in Liu's constructivist account: How do "objects" that accumulate bundles of properties gain their properties? Are they properties of mind? If the process occurs through time, and without stuff, what is it that sustains properties through time of, for example, a star? Q1 Liu chooses not to consider the question of time, but I do not see how he can resolve the question of the existence of stars or even more accessible entities without entertaining the question of time. This would be especially pertinent if properties accumulate or are added over time. Hence his claim to have ruled out substance as unconstructed stuff remains to be confirmed.

« 16 » Liu proceeds to the claim that neither can properties play the role of unconstructed stuff (§22). He proposes instead to construct all features in the world by virtue of experience. This claim remains problematic in that it does not account for what constitutes experiences. Cumulative experience by both psychological and by other scientific accounts involves interactions with entities beyond the self. What remains after a self undergoes an experience or a collection of related experiences? Are such experiences cumulative? Where do they reside? Q2

« 17 » How does Liu's constructivism relate to Goodman's starmaking? Liu proposes to "save" Goodman's views on the questions relating to starmaking philosophy. Goodman would likely appreciate the attention given to his views here. However, Goodman viewed his own versions as being subject to change in the face of new knowledge. So it would be doubtful that Goodman would find convincing the seeming closure that Liu provides in his constructivist analysis of starmaking.

« 18 » So how problematic is Liu' deviation from Goodman's original constructivism? Goodman throughout his career expresses a willingness to accept alternate right world versions "made by and answering to true or right versions" (Goodman 1978: 94). Goodman would, in principle, be open to Liu's efforts to bring to attention possibilities for new thinking on a constructivist resolution of starmaking and the problem of stuff.

« 19 » In conclusion, Liu's essay offers a welcome contribution inviting attention once more to Goodman's views on constructivist starmaking and the problem of stuff. His analysis provides an update addressing recent criticisms while providing his own defense of Goodman's constructivism. His essay thus aims to support Goodman's constructivist views on starmaking while making his own contribution to the matter. Liu extends beyond Goodman's constructivism in his efforts to provide support for a constructivist understanding of starmaking today. Goodman would have likely welcomed the continued interest in one of his principal topics.

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