Dialectics in Action, World at Stake

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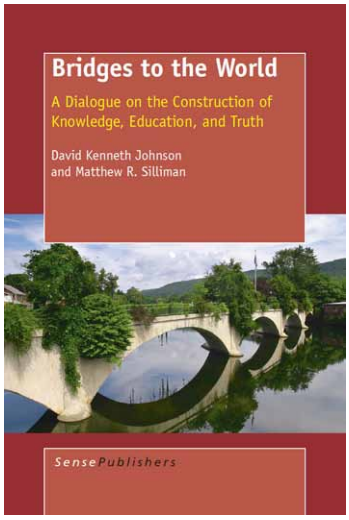
> Upshot • This is a deceptively profound, compact book that can be inscribed in the grand tradition of philosophical dialogue. It confronts naive realism and radical constructivism, arriving at a seemingly workable conciliatory position.



Review of *Bridges to the World. A Dialogue on the Construction of Knowledge, Education, and Truth* by David Kenneth Johnson & Matthew R. Silliman. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 2009. ISBN 978-90-8790-891-1, 110 pages.

"I never read a book I must review; it prejudices you so" figures among the hundreds of aphorisms attributed to Oscar Wilde (cf. Bayard 2007). Let me assure that yours truly did attentively read the book under consideration, although indeed it did not leave him unprejudiced. This is the fictitious story of Alison Bridges (sic), a literature teacher, who has recently received a letter from Jules Randolph Govier, a student of hers who is aggrieved at having been graded C minus for creative writing. Jules flatly denounces Alison's "masculinist" judgment, refusing to succumb to her standards being imposed on him, proudly confessing himself to be a radical constructivist instead. "I respectfully decline to be defined by others, to allow my life and work to be colonized" (2). The stage thus being set, Alison, confused, invites two academic friends of hers to join her in an in-depth discussion of the matter at hand: Russell Steadman, a philosopher, and Hans Völler, an educator. These will be the main characters for the rest of the book, with Alison acting as moderator of their dialogue. Russell and Hans may be type-casted as a naive realist and a radical constructivist, respectively. Contrary to Russell's initial inclination to dismiss Jules' letter as utterly incoherent, Hans insists on taking it seriously and closely investigate the claims forwarded there; and so a gracious "dance of knowledge" (chapter two's title) sets in.

Among the topics covered in the course of the session (spanning an evening at Alison's), the status of the – alleged – outside world naturally takes a prominent place. Is it just usefully illusory, i.e. made up by us, or is it actually there, and if so, is that in a full-blooded or rather lesser, even minimal sense? According to Hans, unsurprisingly, any objects referred to are contained in our experience alone, without residing anywhere else; while for Russell, objects perceived are objects–in–themselves, being really "out there", independently of experience. For Hans, such mind-independence would require a god's eye view or view from nowhere, because to make this claim indeed requires a hypothetical position external to that of any observer. Knowledge, however, by definition is perspectivist. In consequence of this, Hans chooses to remain metaphysically innocent or neutral, and embraces ontological agnosticism. "I cannot know in any given instance whether the obstacle I confront originates from within or outside of my experience. I remain open to either possibility" (85). For Russell, on the other hand, there is such a thing as hypothetical, "free–floating" experience, any observational particularities of which can be removed such that the observed becomes logically independent from concrete experience and may thus refer to a world in itself. For its lack of an objective arbiter of our judgment, he deems Hans' position, in which experiences do not refer to anything outside themselves, utterly vacuous or tautological.

The latter point can also be rephrased as a case against radical skepticism. When nothing is ever immune to doubt, then for lack of any possible fixed reference, the very concepts of error and illusion become senseless. How, in that case, can one, e.g., speak coherently of degrees of certainty? Hans retorts with an appeal to Ernst von Glasersfeld's pragmatic approach of epistemic viability or usefulness–without–truth, in which there is no one immutable state of affairs to be discovered. Fallibilistic realism, for him, is but an oxymoron, under the flag of which one is striving for the unattainable, namely, absolute knowledge. So why conjecture that goal to begin with? For Hans, this amounts to metaphysical extravagance, an application of Ockham's Razor that is, however, renamed for this occasion as Ockham's Guillotine by Russell, who claims the realist option to be an inference to the best explanation. Other instances of threatening paradox concern higher order problems surrounding the core epistemological questions. E.g., can it be an indubitable fact that the world is my construction, or is such a claim plainly self-defeating? Hans' rejoinder is for knowledge workers not to engage in any absolutist talk, but just to entertain those constructions that actually do a good job, like a map giving direction. For Russell, however, the unwillingness to hook the map up with the terrain (as it is) amounts to obscurantism. One can either accept these arguments or not. In any case, taken together they subtly show that the epistemological consequences of one's

ontological choices are by no means trivial, and that as fallible creatures we should be sensitive to this circumstance.

I now pass to some general appreciative remarks. This is a deceptively profound book. As a first and, as it were, meta-fictitious dialogue confronting you, Reader, it very intelligently sets out an apology for philosophy and for dialectical exchange of ideas in particular. Indeed, this book can be inscribed in the grand tradition of philosophical dialogue (including Plato, Berkeley, Hume, and Lakatos, among others). Due to this format, one does not find here a systematic introduction to the theme, but rather gets acquainted with the constructivism vs. realism debate through what comes across as real life discussion (albeit among university professors). This has a number of fortunate consequences. Not (only) a specialist audience, but one of modestly literate readers can be safely aimed at, for example. Combined with this, one is not overwhelmed by explicit references, but rather can enjoy intertextuality at one's own level – beginner or advanced – and still get a good introduction to the issues at stake. It is also reassuring: through her efforts at interpreting and understanding the sometimes sophisticated arguments of both her friends, Alison is constantly in the business of reconciling and synthesizing their positions. This has a nice stylistic effect: the main points of the discussion are regularly summarized for the reader, while never getting stuck in a fruitless "your opinion against mine" debate (an all-too-human inclination of both protagonists). It is dialectics in action, so to speak, and a broader lesson as such. Implicitly connected to this pedagogical dimension, in one of the compact chapters, the matter of education is touched upon (invoking and discussing Dewey). Indeed, the philosophy behind educators' practices arguably has an important bearing upon their success. More particularly, stimulating discovery is probably better facilitated when entertaining a constructivist spirit, that is when being allowed as a learner to examine, explore, discover things for oneself, instead of having to parrot what the "experts" (instructors) are saying. This much might not even be so controversial (as granted by Russell), but unfortunately it is too removed from the actual ontological discussion to give a lot of weight to the constructivist's case.

It also comes closest to what was the (remember, fictitious) occasion for the dialogue, viz. Jules' letter. Here we touch upon one particular aspect of the book that, on the whole, I found a little unfortunate. It is the consequence of a choice I do not quite understand. That is, why have Jules challenge an aesthetic judgment, viz. of fiction writing, when the whole of the ensuing discussion concerns knowledge claims (the paradigm of which would be a scientific proposition)? Strangely, there is no reference whatsoever to be found to this apparent asymmetry. True, a similar debate could easily be organized - that is, about the objectivity of artistic value. But surely reaching a middle ground there would seem both much less controversial and more common. As it applies to the case before us: Alison would not be easily tempted to hold that any criteria for grading Jules' paper reside in an ontologically independent realm. Of course she "constructs" her qualitative judgment on (inter)subjective grounds. Should even that much be prohibited, then how could Alison ever be in a position to evaluate Jules's work? Still, that is what Jules ludicrously seems to claim. Indeed, he refuses to accept anyone else's standards of judgment. In fact, without touching the heart of the matter, this is consistent with one of the recurring themes of the volume: that of (in)tolerance for other opinions. Constructivism has indeed been associated in this respect with what can be called a "pro-diversity" movement, fighting a common confusion between the search for truth and obedience to institutional authority (cf. neo-colonial or feminist studies). Russell issues a warning in this respect not to confound dogmatism with fallibilism, pointing out that adherence to realism cum truth can and must go hand in hand with toleration of error, and that – verificationism being dead and buried – all knowledge is hypothetical and dependent on context. "Questioning the truthfulness of any particular claim is one thing; rejecting the very notion of truth is quite another" (45).

Let me now get back to the prejudices referred to at the outset of my review. For, nearing the end of the story, an innocent reader might perhaps all too easily find himself in the "reasonable" company of Alison: neither purporting to give an infallible state of affairs, nor downplaying the value of one's opinion. Indeed, Alison somewhat optimistically concludes that a middle ground called "constructive realism" (chapter seventeen) seems to have been gained: avoiding solipsism (to be dissociated from constructivism) and empty tautology, embracing knowledge as hypothetical and prone to error (healthy skepticism), fighting dogmatism, and promoting tolerance for alternative truth claims. In sum, "I perceive a shared picture emerging of human knowers as fallible, vulnerable creatures trying to find their way in a world that contains and constrains them" (77). As such, this position unavoidably entails a minimal dose of realism, most particularly when it comes to the status of knowing subjects. For claiming them to be constructions in their turn threatens to drive us into another circularity: "We're all realists about something, even if that something fails to exceed the contents of the mind that thinks it" (83). The book actually closes with a reply by Alison to Jules, expounding the alleged consensus position, as applied to their underlying dispute: epistemic bridges are built to something external to our minds, a world beyond our experience that is simultaneously constrained by it, such that knowledge and world making go hand in hand. Thus the C minus ironically becomes the strongest argument against other minds as mere constructions. "Every time you acknowledge another person, you acknowledge a locus of experience analogous to your own but outside your control, a little constructor of a world of experience sort of like yourself" (103).

This is not the place to engage in depth in the finesses of the underlying, theoretical debate. However, at this point it is not only fair but also instructive to bring the authors' position, viz. "constructive realism" (as embodied by Alison), more explicitly to the fore. In this respect the reader is referred to an interesting, recent discussion in the pages of this very journal, involving David Kenneth Johnson and Hugh Gash (Johnson 2010; Gash 2010). From this discussion, one might learn that the very possibility of a conciliatory position is not a trivial matter by far. Indeed, one may ask what could be the point of a radical constructivist giving up on the very cornerstone and ultimate ba-

sis of consistency of his account, viz. not acknowledging an external world, *as opposed to* the reality of each one's experiential world (while a similar sacrifice is not demanded from the realist)? From within this wider context, looking back on the utterly pleasant reading trip, one might realize that at least part of one's sympathy for the conciliatory position could boil down to a matter of style rather than content. Alison generously negotiates for us between two extreme, seemingly "unworkable" accounts, arguably presented exactly to serve in that way.

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