

# Does World Making Make Sense? Creativity and Objectivity in Nature

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## 1. Introduction

In 1978 Nelson Goodman in *Ways of World-Making* wrote that both objects and knowledge are in important ways constructed: "...if worlds are as much made as found, so also knowing is as much remaking as reporting."<sup>1</sup> Goodman at the time was concerned primarily with art and the senses in which "world making" makes sense in the context of artistic creation. His remarks often suggest that he is willing to extend the point beyond the arts, like the one just quoted, but he does not develop that thought in the book. Since Goodman's book was published, however, the notion that our world is in some ways and to some extent our own creative construction has been expanded far beyond the realm of artistic creation, and it has gained a currency it lacked even as recently as 1978. Since Goodman, what I will refer to broadly as postmodernism has vigorously argued for "constructivism," in the sense of the creative construction of our worlds and their meaning for us.

The opponents of this tendency, whatever we might call them, have objected that by now the rejection of objectivity has gone too far. It may be appropriate to refer to these critics as modernists, and their view as modernism, in that they tend to support two central assumptions of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century thought. The first is that "reality" has its traits independently of human interaction with it, and that reality can be known, or discovered. I have placed the word "reality" in quotation marks because the use of the term is itself charged with meaning and implications. Most importantly is the fact that in this context reality is defined as objectivity, which is to say that something is real, or "really real" as writers in this vein are occasionally inclined to say, if it exists independently of people. The rest is mere fiction, or even worse, mere appearance. This idea that the real is only that which is independent of people has wrecked havoc in philosophy, causing far too much ink to be spilled in the attempt to distinguish between reality and "appearance." This has in turn created additional confusion over how to understand experience. Since experience is by definition human experience, and

therefore has something to do with human interaction with whatever might be objective, it fails to meet the definition of “real,” which in turn has caused countless philosophers to concern themselves with the relation between experience and reality.

The definition of reality as the objective, in the sense of being in possession of traits independently of human interaction, has, as I have indicated, inclined many thinkers to regard the products of human activity as “unreal.” Thus fictional characters, to consider literary creation as an illustration, would be considered unreal, despite the fact that they have some traits and not others, and that they can be decidedly influential in human experience. The modernist assumption that the real is to be defined as the objectively determined has created for philosophers many of their own problems, like the problems of the relation between reality and appearance, between reality and experience, and the question of the ontological status of human products. The suspicion that these problems are themselves artificial is in part what has allowed the postmodernist interest in creativity and constructivism to flourish.

If the ideas of world making and the creative construction of meaning have received their impetus in part from a suspicion that modernist assumptions are misguided and therefore have led to more confusion than clarity, the modernist assumptions in turn receive their most plausible justification in the natural sciences. Modernism, in the sense I have been using the term here, argues for discovery over creativity, and points to the sciences as the clearest cases of inquiry in which the world is not made but discovered.

There are two aspects of the modernist defense of discovery in science that need to be highlighted. The first is that beginning with early modernism, in fact beginning in classical Greece, the assumption of objectivity and the possibility of discovery was extended far beyond the material world to include ethical and aesthetic values, social and political relations, art and literature, and mathematical entities and relations. When I use the expression “the assumption of objectivity” here I mean the assumption that there are facts, conditions, or states of affairs true of the world regardless of us, that is to say facts that have certain determinate traits and not others despite whatever we might say or think about them. On the face of it this assumption is easy enough to maintain in reference to rocks, trees, animals and chemicals, that is to the more or less brute material

world. The classical and modernist assumption, though, was to apply this view to virtually everything. On the assumption of ontological objectivity, it was taken simply as a given that there is an objective truth to be discovered in all fields of inquiry, so that the vast bulk of philosophical writing for more than two thousand years has been an ongoing attempt to discover the objective truth in ethics, aesthetics, social and political theory, art, and mathematics.

The assumption of objectivity in all these fields of inquiry has had ramifications beyond the purely intellectual realm, and it continues to be influential in, for example, practical politics. I will offer one current illustration of this point. As we all know, the events of September 11, 2001 had a profound impact on social and political life in the United States, an impact the extent of which we are only now beginning to realize. The more socially and politically conservative forces in American life, which is to say the forces with by far the greatest influence on public policy, have used the event to advance their social agenda in ways that most of us would never have imagined possible earlier. A bill called the USA Patriot Act was rushed through a compliant Congress, so that there are now by law an extensive series of challenges to the civil liberties of people in America, both citizens and non-citizens. In the same spirit, the Attorney General John Ashcroft has recently announced the creation of an organization that will recruit citizens to spy and report on the activities of their neighbors, all in the spirit of preventing “terrorists” from acting again.

I mention this in the context of a discussion of the extension of the assumption of objectivity to the non-material world because it is precisely this assumption that is used to defend the Patriot Act and the whole range of actions taken by the Bush administration in the past year. One of the more prominent of the social conservatives who support this general direction is William Bennett, who in the past has served as US Secretary of Education and as the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Bennett has just recently published a book titled *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism*.<sup>2</sup> In his book Bennett attempts to justify both current policy and his version of “Americanism” in general. In the process he of course criticizes American liberals and radicals, which he takes to include most of those teaching in American universities. More to our purposes, though, he goes to great efforts

to attack what he calls “pseudosophisticated relativism,” by which he means what I have here referred to as postmodernism, that is to say the general idea that the world is in important ways not objectively determined but creatively constructed. Among the prime targets for Bennett’s attack is Stanley Fish, a specialist in Milton, a prominent “postmodernist” in literary and cultural theory, and currently the dean of liberal arts and sciences at the University of Chicago. Bennett attributes to Fish the idea that “everything is relative, everything can be justified and all is permitted.” This is a distortion of Fish’s far more sophisticated ideas, but Bennett is right that Fish does indeed criticize the assumption of objectivity. The reason Bennett is so critical of Fish and others who challenge the assumption of objectivity is that by rejecting objectivity in values and social relations generally they call into question what Bennett takes to be the foundation of civilization and culture. For example, Bennett says that September 11 was an event through which good and evil were starkly contrasted, in which “Good was distinguished from evil, truth from falsehood.” For Bennett and many that share his general opinion it is no more complicated than that: there is good and evil, truth and falsehood, and of course America represents “good and truth.” The point is that Bennett’s view of the situation, in fact his whole justification of “why we fight” requires the assumption of objectivity. It is inconceivable to him, in fact it is nearly criminal, to reject the traditional assumption of objectivity in values, because without it there appears to him to be nowhere to stand, no way to distinguish right from wrong, better from worse. And that in turn is why he is as critical as he is of Fish and postmodernism in general. Postmodernism is a threat to the American establishment’s ability to justify itself. The American establishment, and its foreign and domestic policy, appear on Bennet’s view to require the assumption of objectivity.

So the extension of modernism’s defense of discovery in science to other fields of inquiry has both theoretical and practical implications. But in addition to the objectivity of values, there is a second aspect of modernism’s defense of discovery and assumption of objectivity that I would like to mention. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the development of the social sciences has reflected the modernist assumption. On the model of the natural sciences, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists and economists have made extensive efforts to discover the objective truths of their respective domains.

Many have carried this so far that they reject any methods in their disciplines that do not mimic the natural sciences. Thus the social sciences have become increasingly descriptive and quantitative. There is some virtue in this, but the determination to discover objective truth makes it unlikely that the social sciences will be able to recognize, never mind appreciate, the extent to which people's relations are creative and constructive of their worlds and their lives. The assumption of objectivity and the methods of inquiry based on it simply preclude the creative dimension of people's lives.

So the big issue here is the tension between discovery and construction – how, in what sense, and to what extent, is our world found or made, discovered or constructed? Some scholars have attempted a middle ground between pure discovery and pure creation. In the American tradition the most prominent and influential among them has been John Dewey. If one had to choose only one example of his many writings on this score it might be chapter 10 of his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* titled “The Construction of Good,” in which he argues that the choice between objectivity and relativism in values is a false choice. The good is neither simply discovered, nor is it arbitrary, rather it is the ongoing and fluid result of the interaction of people with one another, with their environment, and with their individual and collective purposes. The good is neither found nor chosen, but created.<sup>3</sup> More recently Pierre Bourdieu attempted something similar. In *Le Sens Pratique*, for example, which is translated into English as *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu objects to both of the prevailing approaches in anthropology, which he identifies with the assumption of objectivity on the one hand and the assumption of subjectivity on the other.<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu rejects the anthropologists' objectivist assumption, and the subjectivist alternative, in favor of what he calls “habitus,” by which he means, if I understand him correctly, the dimensions of social and cultural life, which include the full range of cultural practices and values, that are definitive of a society and that contain and convey the culture's most meaningful dimensions. The reason he rejects them is that neither the objectivist nor the subjectivist assumption allows the anthropologist to understand the collectively creative dimension of cultural life. The assumptions themselves preclude access to what turns out to be the most important dimension of individual and social activity, which is the creative

construction of value and meaning, and the cultural practices through which that creation takes place.

I have mentioned Dewey in connection with the response to the modernists' assumption of objectivity, and I would add that one could also point to the entire pragmatist and naturalist tradition from which Dewey emerged. Long before Richard Rorty, for example, George Santayana rejected the metaphor of reflection in his understanding of inquiry and knowledge, in fact several years before Dewey's *Logic*.<sup>5</sup> Both Santayana and Dewey, as well as many other pragmatists and naturalists, regarded the world of experience, which is to say nature itself, including both the experiencer and the object of experience, to be the result of an ongoing and changing relation of interaction. Thus in the social sciences, and in the study of values, the assumption of objectivity has been questioned and in intriguing ways rejected.

The treatment of the tension between discovery and construction that we find in Bourdieu, and in the American pragmatist and naturalist traditions, is in my view the most valuable approach to the question available to us. I propose now to explore the issue along these lines.

## 2. The Creative Construction of Meaning

There is a tension between discovery and creativity because both modernism and postmodernism are partially right. The fact is that both discovery and creation, finding and making, are true of the world and of human inquiry. The tension between them is due to the fact that the modernist and postmodernist traditions have tended to exaggerate their claims. Modernism has emphasized objectivity to such an extent that it has obscured the many respects in which people in fact do create their lives, their societies, and most importantly the respects in which their lives have meaning. This is done implicitly in daily life. More formally, it is done through the arts and the humanities, more than anywhere else. Literature, music, the visual arts, the performing arts, history, and even philosophy, each work with their own materials and in their own way, but they have one important trait in common. They all select aspects of their subject matter and relate them in new ways, whereby they generate, and reveal to an audience, new relationships, new meaning, and new experience. These activities are all creative of our worlds precisely in that they bring to our attention ways of seeing and thinking that had not been available

before. Furthermore, in doing so they are not simply revealing something that has all along been hidden, waiting to be discovered. On the contrary, they are creating new properties of the world, novel characteristics of the subjects they study and of the lives of those of us who participate in them, as either observers or participants.

One of the traits of human inquiry and production that makes this possible is that the modes of articulation, of judgment if you will, do not simply assert. When we write, or paint, or compose, we do not merely report the world. Human judgment, in addition to being assertive, is also exhibitive and active. In its exhibitive dimension we reassemble traits of our subject matter to create new relationships and to reveal them in fresh ways. In other respects, our judgment is active in that we bring into being something that did not exist before, and in so doing change the world, sometimes trivially and sometimes profoundly. Human inquiry, in other words, does not simply report, find or discover. In its selection of traits of its subject matter for emphasis and development it engenders and creates.<sup>6</sup>

I have mentioned before the fact that the social sciences have too often slavishly followed the model of the natural sciences, and in so doing have made it difficult if not impossible to notice, let alone to understand, such creative dimensions of human activity. Given the degree to which human judgment is creative, implicitly in daily life and explicitly in the arts and humanities, the social scientist is at risk of failing to grasp crucial dimensions of individual and social life if he too vigorously insists on the modernist assumption of objectivity. It would benefit the social scientist, and the rest of us, to realize as well that even in the natural sciences there is a sometimes deep dimension of creativity that is too often overlooked. The development of theory is itself a creative act, which can be especially obvious in the case of theories that attempt to explain a broad range of phenomena. The theory of evolution, for example, or of plate tectonics, or the current superstring theory in theoretical physics, are examples of intellectual constructs that, like their counterparts in the arts and sciences, select traits of their subject matter for new emphasis, and in so doing create relationships that were simply not there before. A similar process occurs when scientists and mathematicians create new mathematics in order to solve a problem. Newton and Leibniz were not simply reporting the world or discovering its traits when they developed the infinitesimal

calculus, nor was the new mathematics created to solve Fermat's Theorem merely a report. Similarly, the complex geometries of some fourteen dimensions currently at work in superstring theory are not so much a discovery as a creation. The modernist assumption of objectivity and its focus on discovery as against creativity has overstated its case to such an extent that on its basis we miss much of what is most valuable not only in the arts and humanities but in the sciences and mathematics as well.

At the same time, the emphasis on making and creativity in much of postmodernist thought has undervalued objectivity and discovery. First, of course, there is the psychological fact that discovery is in itself thrilling, as any working scientist will tell you. But more generally, the role of creativity in human action and inquiry has been so exaggerated that the fact of objectivity has itself been obscured. To offer a couple anecdotal examples, I have found myself in conversation with philosophers who are so nervous and squeamish about objectivity that they say things like "the world is whatever we say it is," or who have trouble granting what to me is the obvious point that a door in the wall is where it is and not somewhere else, and no amount of redescription will allow us to walk through it at any other point in the wall. There are, to make the point again, aspects of the world that are indeed independent of our descriptions of them. In some cases they are independent of us altogether, as for example the chemical reaction in a particular cloud nebula at some remote point in space. In other cases they are traits that we can influence, but only in ways and to the extent that the objective traits allow, for example the structure of certain chemicals. And even in those cases where the "object" in question is a human product, say a piece of music or a fictional character, the products, as created, have certain traits and not others, and so our creative interactions with them are limited by the constraints imposed by their objectively determined properties. The assumption of creativity, then, like the assumption of objectivity, can be as detrimental as it is liberating. This is a fact that we cannot honestly ignore, such that any understanding of both objectivity and creativity requires that we appreciate their legitimate standing in human inquiry and indeed their interrelation with one another.

### 3. Relationality

In the end, then, the most fruitful understanding of creativity and objectivity is that they stand in a symbiotic relation with each other. Objectivity provides the framework in



which creativity occurs, and creativity is the developmental process of the world, and the generation of whatever meaning and value objectively determined aspects of nature might have. Objectivity and creativity are each senseless without the other.

This point does raise a question that is well worth pursuing, namely what must the world be like such that both objectivity and creativity seem to require one another? Or more generally, is there a specific ontology that best captures this fact about nature and human activity within it? I would not ask the question if I did not have an answer ready to hand, and that is that we are best served to understand nature relationally, a claim easy to make and much more difficult to fill out. The modernist assumption of objectivity came complete with an ontology of substance, in which all “real” objects or entities, material or spiritual, exist by virtue of a completely determined and immutable substance. Such relations and changes as the entity might undergo are merely attributes, and secondary attributes at that, of objective and immutable substance. With such an ontological point of departure it is hardly surprising that the modernist tradition would have difficulty ascribing a significant place to creativity.

Far too often, however, the postmodernist rejection of objectivity is accompanied by a rejection not only of a substance ontology but of ontology altogether. The result, again not surprisingly, is a world in which things are “whatever we describe them as,” either individually or collectively, through one or another medium, for example wealth or power. Neither a complete embrace of objectivity nor its abandonment is adequate, nor is a substance ontology or the rejection of ontology adequate either. The alternative is a conception of nature in which things, entities, objects, or the preferable term “complexes,” are understood to be constituted by their relations with one another. In this view I am following the conception of Justus Buchler, who elaborated the details of a relational ontology in his work *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*.<sup>7</sup> To provide a sense of the scope of Buchler’s idea, I will cite the first few lines of his book:

Whatever is, in whatever way, is a natural complex. The entire sequel, in a sense, amplifies this statement. Relations, structures, processes, societies, human individuals, human products, physical bodies, words and bodies of discourse, ideas, qualities, contradictions, meanings, possibilities, myths, laws, duties, feelings, illusions, reasonings, dreams – all are natural complexes.<sup>8</sup>

First, then, the claim that all complexes are to be understood relationally, as constituted relationally, means to apply to anything and everything that can be said to exist or to prevail in any way. Of course not everything simply exists in whatever way we might say it does. We are capable of being mistaken. This view does not, for example, mean that God exists in the traditional sense of the term simply because it is verbally identified. It does mean, however, that as a complex with a pervasive presence in history and culture, and in many people's individual lives, God exists in some way or other. The "some way or other" is critical here, because it means that not only do all complexes prevail, but they prevail in some respect, in some set of relations, or more technically, in some order of relations. To take the example of God, which is one of the more difficult cases, we can rightfully say that God prevails in any number of orders, for example in the order of human history, in the order of literature, in the order of objects of veneration. Whether God also prevails in the orders of relations commonly attributed, for example as creator or savior, is another question. The important point is that it makes no sense to speak of a complex outside of any order, so that the specific spheres of relations in which a complex prevails are the determining factors in a complex's existence and identity.

A less controversial example may make the point more clearly. A particular human being is a complex that prevails in numerous orders of relations – as man or woman, father or mother, son or daughter, perhaps as teacher or bookkeeper, as citizen, as neighbor, as artist or plumber. Each of these sets of relations contributes to the identity of the particular person, and collectively they define who that person is, and what his possibilities are. And it is important to note that it is the relations, or better the orders of relations, that define a person's identity and parameters. There is no need in such a conception, such an ontology, for the traditional modernist conception of substance as the permanent core or essence of the person through all his relational locations. The person is what he is by virtue of his relations, or to put it another way, a person's relations constitute his being. This is the sense in which this is a relational ontology. And keep in mind that this point applies to "whatever is, in whatever way," to repeat Buchler's phrase. It is true of a book, or a poem, or a piece of music, or a mathematical proof, or a tree, or any other complex whatsoever, that it prevails, if it prevails or exists at all, in a collection or set of relations.

Thus the nature or character of a complex is defined by its relations, its relational or “ordinal” locations, whether those relations involve people or not. Certainly for a human product like a poem, or a piece of music, or a building, there are relations, extremely important ones, to one or more human beings. But even for a human product there are other relations as well. A building, for example, inhabits different orders of relations depending on the material out of which it is constructed, or the ongoing movement of the earth on which it is built. And of course there are complexes that bear no meaningful relation to human beings at all, such as an object or event in remote space. All of these relations provide what we can call the “natural definition” of a complex. Complexes are “defined,” which is to say they have the nature, character, and traits that they do, but virtue of their relations. And their relations are the natural occasion, if you will, of the existence of the complex.

The idea of natural definition of relationally constituted complexes is important for our purposes because it is the way to understand objectivity and creativity in nature. Complexes, or the traits of complexes, are objective precisely in the sense that they are naturally defined by their relational locations. There is no more to it than that. However, because objectivity is defined in terms of relations, it becomes possible to understand how creativity is also possible. As complexes enter new relations, new orders of relations, they take on new traits, new characteristics. They can be said to “prevail” in new orders. When a complex comes to prevail in a new order, which is to say that it takes on traits that it did not have previously, there is an instance of creativity. When such a prevalence occurs as a result of human action of any kind, it can properly be said that such human activity has created, or constructed, or simply made, something new, something novel. By understanding creativity this way we can see that it is not a superfluous process, nor merely appearance as opposed to reality. On the contrary, creativity reaches deep into nature itself, in the sense that it is an alteration of the relations that define a complex.

From the point of view of a relational ontology, then, both objectivity and creativity have a central role to play in nature, and in our understanding of human interaction with other complexes of nature. The tension between objectivity and creativity that we identified earlier is the result of a failure on the part of both modernism and postmodernism to understand how nature works. Once we approach nature relationally,

we can see that far from being in tension, objectivity and creativity are complementary characteristics of natural processes. This in turn can help us appreciate the fact that the creation of value and meaning in our individual lives, and in culture generally, is not a mere accretion on reality, but a constitutive characteristic of reality itself.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1978, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> William J. Bennett, *Why we Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism*, New York, NY: Doubleday, 2002. See a review by Marcus Raskin, "Bennett's Pledge of Allegiance," *The Nation*, August 5/12, 2002, pp 33-40.

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1938.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990. See especially chapters 1-3.

<sup>5</sup> George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923.

<sup>6</sup> For an elaboration of this theory of judgment see Justus Buchler, *Nature and Judgment*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1955

<sup>7</sup> Justus Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1966.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.