

Goodman, Solipsism, and Immaterialism

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Abstract: I consider two problems arising in the context of Goodmanian constructivism as discussed by Bin Liu: the question of solipsism and the status of immaterial minds.

1. There are various points in Bin Liu's discussion of Goodman's constructivism that deserve commentary. I will focus on two; the first is the problem of solipsism, the second the question of implications of Goodmanian constructivism for the philosophy of mind.

The problem of solipsism

2. Liu manages to avoid solipsisms by arguing that we should take "the totality of experiences rather than the experiences of a single person as the constructans of features in the world" (§35). In this way his account differs, for example, from Rudolf Carnap's system in the *Aufbau* where an "autopsychological basis" is used as a constructional basis (an expression of Carnap's "methodological solipsism," Carnap 1928: §64). I am not sure how much weight should be put Liu's reasons for the admittance of experiences of others into the basis of construction. Liu argues that we can access them, amongst other ways, through language. However, what keeps me from considering the experiences of another, as well as their manifestations in the form of linguistic and physical actions as constructions made on the basis of my experiences, constructions subsequently construed as linguistic and physical actions of another person? If, by contrast, the experiences of others are to be included in the basis of construction because they are accessible to me through my experience of hearing people speak etc., why are tables and chairs then not also included, given that they are accessible to me through visual, tactile, auditory etc. experiences? We can concede that even if the experiences of others were not included in the basis of construction, the resulting system would not be quite solipsism, in the sense that only I and my experiences exist at the fundamental level of reality, since for Liu the self is no "unified object in the world" (§18) and "the self as a unifying device is rejected" (§36). This is reasonable, as for the Goodman there is no ultimately real (i.e., unconstructed) entity, and therefore the self cannot play such a role either. Nevertheless, Liu's justification for including the experiences of other persons into the constructional basis appears rather elusive. It would have appeared to me more satisfactory to take as the basis of construction all experiences directly accessible to me, that is, all experiences that present themselves to me via perception and introspection. This would not result in a form of phenomenological foundationalism if we also assume that experiences could not exist in an isolated manner, but that they only exist in a network of mutual dependence

relations, dependence relations that do not exist in a wholly mind-independent manner, but dependence relations that involve mental activity as an essential component.

Goodmanian constructivism and the philosophy of mind

3. Liu focuses on the *problem of stuff* (“What is the basis from which all constructions are constructed?”) while leaving the *problem of time* (“How did things that existed prior to humans get constructed?”) to one side (§7). Both problems are relatively closely connected, however. Whatever Goodmanian constructions amount to, it seems plausible that they take place in time (the basis of construction exists *before* the construct) and that they are carried out by conscious minds (a set of two electrons circling a nucleus does not construct anything). The first assumption lets us follow the constructive process backwards in time, by considering for each construction the temporally prior basis from which it is constructed. If we follow it up to a time before the arising of biological life, the second assumption entails that it is possible for conscious minds to exist in the absence of biological life. We therefore seem to be able to derive a very substantial conclusion in the philosophy of mind from little more than general principles concerned with constructions.¹ Liu seems to accept this independence of mind from matter (“We do not need to involve bodies or observers into the constructans at the beginning” §36, “The history of phenomenal experiences is longer than the history of human beings [...],” §39) This is relevant for the discussion of whether the constructivist worldview should be preferred over its realist rivals (§47): many would presumably see the assumption of immaterial minds as a sufficiently high price to justify a *modus tollens* argument against the Goodmanian premises.

4. Are there ways of rejecting the move from Goodmanian constructivism to immaterialism? It is of course the case that the ontology of immaterial minds we appear to end up with is, from the Goodmanian perspective, as constructed as everything else, and is not some final truth about the world’s ultimate constituents. Yet presumably there has to be some sense in which, on Goodmanian constructivist terms, the claim “conscious minds can exist independent of matter” is to be preferred to the claim “conscious minds cannot exist independent of matter.” (It is, coincidentally, not entirely clear whether the criteria for the rightness of versions presented in §3 are of any help in this context: assuming the theory in question is coherent, it is clearly inconsistent with the dominant naturalistic conception of mind, and the extent to which it may be “useful with respect to a certain purpose” is at least not obvious.) Assuming that immaterialism cannot simply be blocked by claiming that it, too, is constructed, the opponent’s best bet seems to concentrate on the premise that constructions take place in time. They could either a) deny this premise, or b) deny that, despite constructions taking place in time, these cannot be followed backwards in the manner indicated in the argument. Move a) might be spelt out as saying that that all constructions are somehow “already there” in some timeless realm, while move b) could be explicated as saying that when the chain of constructions is followed backwards, conscious minds and bases of construction

¹ For further discussion see Westerhoff (2009).

disappear at the same time. While move a) might provide some comfort to everyone who has ever despaired over the assembly of flatpack furniture, there still appears to be some difference between constructions that have been constructed in the world we inhabit, and those that have not, and *this* distinction seems to require the assumption that constructions take place in time. Liu may have more sympathy for move b), arguing in §45 that the backward “tracing” of the dependence chain would terminate in a stage at which there is nothing. Yet this idea seems to me fraught with systematic and textual difficulties. From a systematic point of view, I find it hard to understand how we start with a stage at which there is nothing at all, out of which distinctions start to emerge, which, once they reach a specific level of distinctness, count as manifestations of properties. From a textual perspective, tracing back the chain of constructions to an empty world does not seem to be what Goodman has in mind. He points out that versions are always made from other versions, noting that “[t]he many stuffs – matter, energy, waves, phenomena – that worlds are made of are made along with the worlds. But made from what? Not from nothing, after all, but from other worlds. Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is remaking. Anthropology and developmental psychology may study social and individual histories of such world building, but the search for a universal or necessary beginning is best left to theology.” (Goodman 1978: 6f). Regardless of whether this position is construed as implying a circular or as an infinitely regressive process, it does not appear to include the existence of a stage at which nothing exists, and from which things then begin to arise. If Liu’s aim is to explicate Goodman’s constructivism he should either stick to a version where it is properties “all the way down,” where each property turns out, on analysis, to depend on other more primitive properties, or choose the option that it is properties “all the way round,” that each property depends on some other property for its existence so that there are no independently existent properties. Alternatively, if following Goodman’s lead is less of a concern the discussion would benefit from a more detailed description of how the arising of distinctions “out of nothing” is supposed to work. If we can make good sense of the tracing of the chain of dependence ending where “there is nothing” we should also be able to conceptualize this process running in the other direction, starting with an empty state out of which a chain of dependence emerges.

5. As all of these ways of blocking the move from Goodmanian constructivism to immaterialism just considered appear to be unsuccessful it is necessary to be aware that while the constructivist and realist worldview may be “empirically equivalent,” the former turns out to be in direct conflict with a central belief of contemporary naturalism, namely the view minds cannot exist in the absence of matter.

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