The Social Construction of Nature: Relativist Accusations, Pragmatist and Critical Realist Responses

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Social constructivists argue that what we call "nature" is far less universal and extrahuman than generally assumed. Yet this argument has been vigorously attacked by some natural scientists and other scholars due to what they perceive as its dangerous flirtation with relativism. I introduce this debate by reference to a recent controversy over the concept of wilderness, an important icon of nature in North America. I then define several forms of relativism, and compare two contemporary bodies of thought that are in broad agreement with social constructivism, yet do not promote strong forms of relativism: critical realism and pragmatism. For its part, critical realism is marked by a qualified, though vigorous, rejection of strong forms of relativism in understanding nature, whereas pragmatism involves more of an agnostic response, a sense that the so-called problem of relativism is not as serious as critics of the social-construction-of-nature argument would believe. Taken together, the two approaches offer more than either one alone, as they both suggest important truths about nature, albeit generally at different scales. Ultimately, pragmatists and critical realists alike admit that all knowledges are partial and a certain degree of relativism is thus unavoidable; yet they both, in a sort of tense complementarity, point to ways that geographers and others whose business and concern it is to represent nature can indeed have something to say. *Key Words: nature, wilderness, social constructivism, relativism, critical realism, pragmatism.*

Nature is nothing if it is not social (Smith 1990:30).

What is beyond our own skin actually exists. But this "environment" is largely what we make of it, with all the ambiguities inherent in the word "make" (Simmons 1993:3).

What happens to environmentalist concerns when the object of those concerns, the thing for the sake of which one speaks—nature, wild lands, animals—begins to lose its status as an object, a given, already set thing to which we can refer as if we were not involved in its construction? (Bennett and Chaloupka 1993b:xvi).

A new environmental villain has arisen in recent times. This villain is not of the usual sort—the noxious factory belching smoke onto a despoiled landscape, the greedy resource-extractive industry laying bare the mountainside. The newest enemy of the natural world is far different in form, yet apparently equal in threat, at least as judged by the tone of its detractors. Consider—as but one noteworthy example—the 1995 publication, *Reinventing Na-ture? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*, whose editors, conservation biologist Michael Soulé and historian Gary Lease, summarize their project as follows:

> This multidisciplinary volume is a response to certain radical forms of "postmodern deconstructionism" [sic] that question the concepts of nature and wilderness, sometimes in order to justify further exploitative tinkering with what little remains of wildness. . . . We feel the threats to nature are now so grave that the prudent course is to directly challenge some of the rhetoric. . . . The so-called deconstructionist view . . . asserts that all we can ever perceive about the world are shadows, and that we can never escape our particular biases and fixed historical-cultural positions. . . . The opposing view . . . assumes that the world, including its living components, really does exist apart from humanity's perceptions and beliefs about it. [The contributors] agree[1] that certain contemporary forms of intellectual and social relativism can be just as destructive to nature as bulldozers and chain saws (Soulé and Lease 1995:xv-xvi).

I will refer to this villain by a slightly different name: social constructivism. Though social constructivism includes a variety of arguments (Demeritt 1996; Entrikin 1996:216), of particular interest here is an epistemological argument about the social construction of nature[2]: that what biophysical science reveals is less a glimpse into the workings of the natural world than the culture and politics of scientific knowledge; or, conversely, that nature is not simply something out there that scientific knowledge more or less faithfully mirrors (Rorty 1979).[3] As Elizabeth Bird has argued, "Scientific knowledge should not be regarded as a *representation* of nature, but rather as a socially constructed interpretation with an already socially constructed natural-technical object of inquiry" (Bird 1987:255). Whatever the validity of the fact-value distinction much touted by moral philosophers, environmentalist discourse generally justifies its "oughts" based on scientifically founded assertions of truth concerning the imperiled state of nature. The social construction of nature argument, then, strikes to the epistemological core of environmentalism's moral and political campaign.

The editors' preface to *Reinventing Nature?* targets social constructivism (termed "postmodern deconstructionism" to make it sound appropriately bizarre) in a manner that strikes to one of the core issues at stake: the problem of relativism, a perennial issue dating back at least to Plato's Dialogues,[4] which nonetheless refuses to go away precisely because the epistemological questions it raises are so fundamental. Anticonstructivists have commonly charged that constructivists' notion of truth is thoroughly relativistic, while so-called constructivists have typically countered that anticonstructivists are simply worried about losing their hegemonic role over what counts as "truth." Indeed, relativism has such a negative valence that few avowed constructivists openly embrace it (e.g., Bird 1987:258ff.; cf. Gandy 1996:32); yet the differences between constructivists and anticonstructivists on truth-statements concerning nature are too great to deny.

I enter this discussion as one who is sympathetic to social constructivism though concerned that constructivists have not yet adequately clarified its epistemological complexities as suggested in the charge of relativism raised by their opponents. I also worry that the abyss between constructivists and anticonstructivists is simply too large to be productive, as it fuels little more than misinterpretation and intellectual hostility among scholars of nature. This is not a new feeling to geographers, of course, having many similarities to the divide between positivists and postpositivists among us (Gregory 1979; Johnston 1986; Cloke et al. 1991; Unwin 1992; cf. Demeritt 1996). It also resembles in many ways the recent debate over science's epistemological privilege, launched in large part by that notorious book, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Gross and Levitt 1994). Gross and Levitt took it upon themselves to dismiss a whole host of charges reputedly heaped up by critics of science. The huge chord of sympathy their book struck among reviewers[5] suggests the broad resonance of anticonstructivism among the scholarly community, as does the fact that a pointed constructivist rejoinder to *Higher Superstition* entitled *Science Wars* (Ross 1996) has to date received far less publicity.

It is, therefore, easy to dismiss constructivism quite simply because constructivists are the vast minority in much of the academic community, and certainly among scholars of nature. But that would be tyranny of the intellectual majority; constructivism needs to be taken seriously. And so does relativism: it clearly matters whether, for instance, a certain species is or is not close to extinction, or wastewater discharge from a particular factory is or is not having significant deleterious downstream effects, or current anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions will or will not likely result in unprecedented rates of climate change. Truth-claims concerning the state of nature may not be a *sufficient* condition to justify environmental action, but they are in many cases a *necessary* condition. My intent here is to help facilitate communication across the chasm dividing constructivists and anticonstructivists by exploring the possibility of developing a third position that takes social constructivism seriously but does not rob us of our ability to speak some degree of truth about nature as a consequence.

Epistemology, the study of knowledge, truth, and justification, is well-covered terrain, yet relatively little of this discussion has touched upon the kinds of debates taking place now over environmental protection. My argument will build upon two contemporary philosophical perspectives, both of which are in broad agreement with social constructivism but do not embrace relativism. These two perspectives are pragmatism and critical realism. Pragmatism is an American

philosophical movement developed over the last century that, in the context of nature, has primarily enjoyed popularity among environmental philosophers and practitioners, with some interest expressed among geographers as well; critical realism, a sophisticated descendant of the longstanding philosophy of realism, has, in the last decade, found considerable expression in human geography and has also addressed issues of nature, though its primary base of support is found on the other side of the Atlantic from that of pragmatism. Though neither of these approaches has had a great impact on biophysical science, they can, I believe, speak to this mode of inquiry as well: realism is, in fact, arguably more operationally widespread in the natural sciences than the social sciences (Keat and Urry 1982), and elements of pragmatism have been traced in the work of the natural-resource geographer Gilbert White (Wescoat 1992). I will assume that most readers are passingly familiar with both of these approaches, so I will forego an in-depth background of realism and pragmatism in favor of a more focused look at their perspective on relativism and implications in terms of constructing an epistemology of nature.

Pragmatism and realism are not necessarily exclusive approaches: one example is Hilary Putnam's attempt to define a "pragmatic realism" (Putnam 1981; 1990).[6] In fact, pragmatist and critical-realist efforts in recent times have been broadly similar in their intent to serve as reconstructive epistemological projects, especially in their response to certain negative excesses of postmodernism—the details of which have been well-covered elsewhere and will not be treated here.[7] Yet their positions vis-à-vis relativism have been quite distinct. In brief, critical realism is marked by a qualified, though vigorous, rejection of stronger forms of relativism, whereas pragmatism involves more of an agnostic response, a sense that the so-called problem of relativism is not as serious as some make it out to be.

Critical realism and pragmatism are much more powerful taken together than when considered separately, as they jointly embody a necessary tension at the heart of social constructivism: the dynamic relationship of belief and doubt, confidence and humility, in the social enterprise of learning about nature. Relativism touches on some of the more fundamental epistemological questions scholars of nature must ask—questions that will never, of course, be resolved once and for all. Pragmatism and critical realism can jointly point to the sort of tense epistemological alliance, however, that to me represents the most honest intellectual response to the question of relativism arising from the social-construction-of-nature argument.

Any paper in which the bulk of its nouns are "isms" risks losing the bulk of its readers. That is a real danger here: constructivism, relativism, realism, and pragmatism may collectively sound too abstract to be much more than intellectual froth. Yet the debate over social constructivism reaches beyond abstractions to touch upon a wide spectrum of cases involving nature. As suggested above, one particular case concerns nature-as-physical-world or external, "pure" nature, in contrast to biotechnology and other "mixed" forms of nature that have increasingly concerned scholars of a social constructivist bent (e.g., Haraway 1997). This case is exemplified in the recent conflict over wilderness, pitting those who believe that wilderness is a real entity increasingly under siege by industrial society worldwide against others who argue that it is a peculiarly Euro-American, male construct of nature that derives its persuasive force primarily from their hegemonic voice in environmental discourse. The debate over wilderness—though predominantly North American in scope—is especially important in that wilderness has increasingly been promulgated by large environmental organizations in recent decades as a sort of consummate or ideal nature. Wilderness, in short, currently lies at the heart of the epistemological conflict over external nature, and as such offers an excellent grounding for the ensuing discussion.

The paper will begin with a discussion of recent debates between defenders and deconstructors of wilderness, and a clarification of how the problem of relativism necessarily arises in these debates. I will then consider in turn the kinds of responses to relativism and epistemological positions on nature that follow from critical realist and pragmatist perspectives. I conclude by arguing for the interplay between critical realist and pragmatist approaches in any adequate response.

Wilderness: The Battle over a Concept

The time has come to rethink wilderness (Cronon 1995a:69).

Apparently lacking appreciation for the biological significance of wilderness, Cronon writes about the

subject purely in terms of social and cultural values and understanding (Willers 1996:60).

What Is Wilderness?

Wilderness is, to many environmentalists, a relatively unproblematic category of nature. The author of *Wilderness Preservation: A Reference Handbook* invokes the oft-cited legal definition underlying wilderness legislation in the U.S.:

> In general, wilderness is an area unchanged and uninhabited by humans. The U.S. Congress may have said it best when they described wilderness in the Wilderness Act of 1964: "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (Rosenberg 1994:4).

This definition largely squares with that underlying the profusely illustrated, coffee-table-quality publication, *Nature's Last Strongholds,* whose editor notes "The naturalist regards wilderness as an area untouched by human hand, still covered by its original natural vegetation. It is in this . . . sense that the term wilderness is used in this book" (Burton 1991:10). *Nature's Last Strongholds* is by no means the only attempt to discuss wilderness outside of its legal definition within the U.S.: one recent article entitled "Wilderness around the World" acknowledges cultural differences with respect to the concept, yet argues that there are many similarities as well (Stankey 1993).

Perhaps the greatest scientific stretch of this spatially uniformitarian notion of global wilderness is found in an attempt to quantify the world's remaining wilderness, defined as "land without permanent human settlements or roads and . . . not regularly cultivated nor heavily and continuously grazed" (McCloskey and Spalding 1989:222). This study concludes that roughly one-third of the global land surface is still in wilderness of extent greater than 400,000 hectares (the minimum mapping unit used), and remarks:

> This inventory represents the first time that man has been able to look at how far it has gone in subjugating the Earth and bending it to its use. Two-thirds of the land of the planet is now dominated by our species. But with one-third of the land still dominated by nature, there is still a chance to maintain some measure of balance between "man and nature." But this balance will not occur by acci-

dent. . . . It can slip away easily with little notice of encroachment as billions more are added to the human population (p. 227).

As used in these passages above, wilderness is a real place, a compellingly beautiful place free of human imprint, an object of great worth precisely in having escaped human domination, where natural processes reign unimpeded. Wilderness protection is essential in guarding these processes so fundamental to life on earth from the effects of civilization. Wilderness is, quite simply, nature in its fullest.

Wilderness Critique and the Cronon Debate

Does wilderness in this sense really exist? Arturo Gómez-Pompa and Andrea Kaus have argued in "Taming the Wilderness Myth" that this notion is ignorant of the fact that virtually all of the world's surface has been touched in some way by humans (1992).[8] Yet, clearly, some landscapes have been less modified by people than others; perhaps the central question is whether or not such emphasis should be placed on them. In this context, Michael Pollan has argued that the emphasis on relatively "untouched" aspects of nature offers no guidance on how or whether to care for the vast majority of the planet's surface, which has been to some extent humanized (1991).

These critiques of wilderness, as important as they are, are not necessarily constructivist critiques, as they approach wilderness as primarily a reality, questioning whether or not "untouched" lands exist, or whether or not we should place such emphasis on them. The social-construction-of-nature argument moves from an ontological to an epistemological terrain in scrutinizing not wilderness per se, but the idea of wilderness, the conception shared by wilderness-protection supporters when they speak of wilderness, and all its attendant cultural and political meanings (e.g., Willems-Braun 1997).[9] As the editors of one upcoming anthology of related essays, *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, summarize:

> The received wilderness idea is currently the subject of intense attack and impassioned defense on several fronts at once. The wilderness idea is alleged to be ethnocentric, androcentric, phallocentric, unscientific, unphilosophic, impolitic, outmoded, even genocidal. Defenders of the wilderness idea insist that it is none of these things (Callicott and Nelson 1998:2).

One example of the constructivist perspective on wilderness is a recent essay by the environmental historian (and, interestingly, Wilderness Society board member) William Cronon, entitled "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" (1995a). Cronon's essay touches upon the ontological critiques noted above, yet it more deeply examines the ways in which wilderness serves as an overridingly powerful concept in contemporary environmental ethics and politics. He argues:

> Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, [wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history. . . . Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural (1995a:69).

Cronon speaks of wilderness as a "human creation" not in terms of its ontological properties ("Let me hasten to add that the nonhuman world we encounter in wilderness is far from being merely our own invention," p. 70), but rather in terms of its epistemological qualities, its particular meaning as an overridingly powerful concept of nature in Euro-American culture. Cronon argues that the concept of wilderness has changed in the last several centuries of European history, though some aspects remain largely similar. Until fairly recently, for example, wilderness was not understood as a particularly friendly place; by the end of the nineteenth century, however, wilderness began to take on the positive qualities we attribute to it today. Through this period of conceptual change, certain qualities have been consistently attributed to wilderness, most significantly the sublime (a symbol of God's presence on earth) and the frontier, the boundary between the civilized and the primitive world.

Cronon's most forceful critical point concerns how the concept of wilderness has long entailed an antagonistic dualism between nature and civilization. When wilderness possessed a negative valence, it was seen as a forlorn, barren, unimproved place, or as a cruel and savage place lacking any moral code; when, more recently, it was given a positive valence, it was then seen as a refuge for people from the noise of the city, and for animals from people. Whether in a negative or positive sense, then, wilderness and civilization have almost always been counterposed. To Cronon, this opposition of wilderness and civilization is more a product of the people who pro-

mote this idea than some necessary definitional quality of wilderness. He writes:

> The trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. . . . The dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living—urban folk for whom food comes from a supermarket or a restaurant instead of a field, and for whom the wooden houses in which they live and work apparently have no meaningful connection to the forests in which trees grow and die. Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land (1995a:80).

Cronon summarizes:

> This, then, is the central paradox: wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. . . . To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, *honorable* human place in nature might actually look like (1995a:80–81, emphasis in original).

Cronon's essay was the subject of criticism on several fronts, ranging from personal correspondence to academic journals (e.g., *Environmental History* 1[1], 1996). I will focus below on one such forum over Cronon's essay, the Winter 1996/97 issue of *Wild Earth*. This publication is affiliated with The Wildlands Project (Foreman et al. 1992), a group of conservation biologists and environmentalists working to develop a wilderness recovery strategy for North America. The *Wild Earth* issue on Cronon was specifically dedicated to "Opposing Wilderness Deconstruction," and was edited by ex-Earth First! leader Dave Foreman. In a preface, Foreman writes:

> This issue of *Wild Earth* casts an eye to the dirt clod Professor William Cronon recently tossed at the Wilderness Act and at defenders of Wilderness Areas. . . . Our contributors this issue will show how wrong-headed the good professor is. . . . Cronon's complaints are based on ignorance of biology, a misunderstanding of the conservation movement, and a carelessness about the consequences of his critique of wilderness. . . . Half a century ago, Aldo Leopold warned us that there were those who could

live without wild things, and those who could not. That still explains it (1996:i, 4).

Contributors to the volume include several well-known figures, all of whom hurl anticonstructivist arguments in Cronon's direction.[10] Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and bioregionalist Gary Snyder, for example, writes of his home in northern California in "Nature as Seen From Kitkitdizze Is No 'Social Construction'" (1996); philosopher and deep ecologist George Sessions echoes the *Reinventing Nature?* volume in attacking "postmodern deconstruction . . . a 1960s spinoff from Marxism; a contemporary form of anthropocentric humanism which espouses cultural relativism, an antipathy to science, and a preference for cities" (1996:46).

One of the more strident critiques found in this issue is that of biologist Bill Willers, entitled "The Trouble with Cronon" (1996). Willers argues that Cronon's essay has had an even greater negative impact on environmentalism than the work of Alston Chase, whose critiques of contemporary environmental management (e.g., 1986) have made him somewhat of a hero in the wise-use movement. Cronon is apparently "grossly uninformed" of the "basic truths" of the wilderness movement: the biological truth that wilderness is a key requirement of organic evolution, and the philosophical truth that wilderness is "the essence of a creation possessing inherent rights" (p. 59). These two "truths" ring throughout Willers's essay. Of the first, Willers writes, "Apparently lacking appreciation for the biological significance of wilderness, Cronon writes about the subject purely in terms of social and cultural values and understanding" (p. 60); of the second, he charges "The unstated assumption being made by [Cronon and Chase] is that spiritual connection with the natural world in itself constitutes a rejection of scientific methodology. The assumption is absolutely false" (p. 61). Willers concludes by clearly distancing wilderness from our ideas of it: "Cronon may be correct that ideas of nature don't exist outside of cultural understanding, but Nature in all of its self-governing complexity most certainly does" (p. 61).

Summary: Wilderness and Nature Relativism

Cronon's critique of wilderness involves both a specific and a general argument about nature. The specific argument Cronon makes concerns the way in which the concept of wilderness as-

sumes and furthers a problematic dualism between nature and culture. As important as this argument is, it has been amply discussed elsewhere, and will not receive further consideration here.[11] The general argument Cronon makes—indeed, in many ways more an axiomatic point of departure than an argument—is that wilderness is more a social construction than a reality "out there." This is the argument to which his anticonstructivist detractors respond most passionately, and thus is of central importance here.

The debate over nature-as-social-construction can be clarified in terms of the two necessary actors in any epistemological scheme: the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. The world of the knowing subject is the world of ideas, of concepts, of values; the world of the object of knowledge is the world of reality, of existence. It is "out there," in contrast to the conceptual space in which the subject is suspended. In many ways, these two actors have become opposite poles to which the two sides tenaciously cling.[12] The social-constructivist argument is that "wilderness" is constructed by the knowing subject; it is, as Cronon remarks, "quite profoundly a human creation." The anticonstructivist argument points in the opposite direction; thus Soulé and Lease remark, "The world, including its living components, really does exist apart from humanity's perceptions and beliefs about it," and Willers intones, "Cronon may be correct that ideas of nature don't exist outside of cultural understanding, but Nature in all of its self-governing complexity most certainly does."

Taken at face value, the anti-wilderness argument sets ideas against reality, subject-emphasis against object-emphasis. Yet do social constructivists really believe that the world does not exist outside of our heads?[13] That would be a rather preposterous level of idealism to attribute to this perspective, and Cronon flatly denies any sympathy with it, as noted above. The real difference, the real issue at stake, is epistemological: whether our ideas speak more of the object of knowledge or the knowing subject, whether they point most fundamentally to wilderness "out there" or to the cultural predispositions that accompany our concept of wilderness. Social constructivism thus has some disturbing implications for truth-claims about nature. If indeed "wilderness" is a culturally constructed concept, then to some extent truth-claims about wilderness make sense only as viewed from that cultural perspective. This

epistemological position is known by another name: relativism. To the extent that the social-construction-of-nature argument inevitably courts relativism, then, anticonstructivists will be sure to reject it, no matter what its merits.

Before I move to a discussion of relativism, however, I would like to note an important potential objection to the argument as developed so far: that the concept of wilderness is not of fundamental importance to contemporary environmentalism, that there exist several "end-runs" around the concept of wilderness that nonetheless would support the same policy implications. One possible end-run—adopted even by Cronon to some extent at the conclusion of his essay (1995a:90–91)—is to focus value not on wilderness but *wildness*, on a state of being versus a form of nature. Indeed, Thoreau's famous, though often misquoted, statement reads "In *Wildness* is the preservation of the World" (1937:672, my emphasis).

Wildness is regarded highly in many of the essays found in the recent book *Wild Ideas* (Rothenberg 1995b). As the editor, David Rothenberg, argues:

> The wild is more than a named place, an area to demarcate. It is a quality that beguiles us, a tendency we both flee and seek. It is the unruly, that which won't be kept down, that crazy love, that path that no one advises us to take—it's against the rules, it's too far, too fast, beyond order, irreconcilable with what we are told is right. Wild Thing. Wild Life. Wild One. Wild Child. Wild Culture. You make my heart sing. But who knows what tomorrow will bring? (1995a:xvii).

The boundary between wildness and wilderness in this book is, however, not always clear. Edward Grumbine, for example, conflates the two when he writes of environmental policy: "How do we begin to move from preserving wilderness to protecting wildness? . . . For the present, the first step in any such strategy is to continue to focus on increasing the size and number of the protected areas we know as wilderness" (1995:21). Indeed "wildness" is itself in many ways a social construct (Benton 1993:66ff.), with its own baggage of abandon. Perhaps this is why many scientists prefer rather to focus not on preservation of wilderness but on conservation of biodiversity, which sounds far more scientific. Yet—perhaps unsurprisingly by now—biodiversity itself is profoundly ridden with ideas as well, albeit primarily from the culture of science (Takacs 1996).

Cronon himself anticipated this end-run in his essay:

> Although at first blush an apparently more "scientific" concept than wilderness, biological diversity in fact invokes many of the same sacred values, which is why organizations like the Nature Conservancy have been so quick to employ it as an alternative to the seemingly fuzzier and more problematic concept of wilderness (1995a:81).

Wilderness is thus apparently not alone. The social-construction-of-nature argument is that *all* the concepts we use to refer to biophysical nature and its attendant qualities—wilderness, wildness, biodiversity—are human concepts, and as such carry cultural, political, and other important meanings. The power of this argument lies in its degree of epistemological sophistication; the weakness lies in its mute embrace of relativism. I will first clarify what exactly I mean by relativism, then turn to some contemporary constructivist perspectives on nature that, in their own distinct ways, seek to avoid the problem of relativism.

The Domain of Relativism

> Conceptual relativism is a heady and exotic doctrine, or would be if we could make good sense of it. The trouble is, as so often in philosophy, it is hard to improve intelligibility while retaining the excitement (Davidson 1984:183).

> All the common definitions of . . . relativism are framed by opponents of relativism . . . they are absolutist definitions (Ladd 1982:161).

. . . But There Aren't Any Relativists to Be Found!

To call relativism a central problem in the social-construction-of-nature debate is, admittedly, an imposition: there are scarcely any more card-carrying relativists to be found among constructivists than among anticonstructivists.[14] Geographers sympathetic to the social-construction-of-nature argument generally take great pains to distance themselves from relativism.[15] David Harvey, for instance, expresses general sympathy for social constructivism in the context of nature, yet criticizes the "vulgar" reading of the notion of situated knowledges (an interpretation of Haraway 1988), which "dwells almost entirely on the relevance of individual

biographies" (1996:354), and thus becomes hopelessly relativistic in that no one can purport to speak for, let alone understand, others. David Demeritt, likewise, is highly skeptical of the foundationalist epistemology underlying much environmental history (1994a), yet recommends metaphors of nature from Bruno Latour (1988, 1993) and Donna Haraway (1989, 1991) to argue in part that social constructivism need not imply relativism (1994b:180). In a similar vein, David Livingstone argues:

> The sciences of nature and environment never simply represent the objects of their inquiry in a way that is unadulterated by social, moral, cultural, economic, or political concerns. Rather, the knowledges they deliver are to a considerable degree socially constructed interpretations of the real world. . . . Of course this does not mean that environmental science presents us with nothing but social fictions dressed up in scientific jargon: nature certainly sets limits on what we can say about it. Nor does it mean that we can play fast and loose with the environment, as though all talk of environmental degradation is mere myth-making (1995:371).

The trouble with these denials is twofold. First, there is some unstated assumption that relativism is an unproblematic, generally agreed-upon term requiring no clarification; I will soon suggest that this is not so. The second problem is more basic: all scholars of nature, from arch-constructivists to arch-anticonstructivists, are brokers in knowledge. That is the stuff we produce and trade. To call social constructivism "relativist" is to charge that, according to the epistemological perspective of anticonstructivists, constructivism is not a viable position from which knowledge can be produced. Relativism, in this sense, is less an extreme position to be vigorously denied than an epistemological challenge. I will tackle the first problem below by offering some clarification as to the spectrum of relativisms, and the second problem in the two latter sections on critical realism and pragmatism.

Toward a Definition

Relativism owes much of its popularity, and resistance, during this century to ethnographic work. As Clifford Geertz has said:

> The realization that news from elsewhere about ghost marriage, ritual destruction of property, initiatory fellatio, royal immolation, and . . . nonchalant adolescent sex naturally inclines the mind to an

"other beasts other mores" view of things has led to arguments, outraged, desperate, and exultant by turns, designed to persuade us either to resist that inclination in the name of reason, or to embrace it on the same grounds (1989:15).

Indeed, what Steven Lukes calls "empirical" relativism is indisputable (1977); but the fact that different cultures have different truths does not necessarily imply that truth itself is what one particular culture makes of it. Relativism in this more philosophical sense, however, is not easy to define. The introduction to one recent anthology on the subject, for instance, adopts a circular definition of relativism as the belief that "cognitive, moral, or aesthetic claims involving such values as truth, meaningfulness, rightness, reasonableness, appropriateness, aptness, or the like are relative to the context in which they appear" (Krausz 1989a:1).[16] Another way to define relativism is to consider its opposite. Some suggest rationalism as the opposite of relativism (Haines-Young and Petch 1986), though rationalism is better understood as the counterpart of empiricism: in the former, truth is gained through reason, whereas in the latter, truth arises through observation.[17] It is more common in the literature for realism to be offered as the opposite of relativism, though it is not clear whether this argument entails realism's metaphysical claims, epistemological claims, or both (see below).

In a pure sense, relativism is the opposite of absolutism, "the view that truth (value, reality) is objectively real, final, and eternal" (Angeles 1992:1). The problem with positing absolutism as an alternative is that both of these terms are commonly understood as extreme cases: it seems just as impossible to be a little absolutistic or relativistic as it is to be a bit of a murderer.

Somewhat more clarification arises from proceeding in the other direction. Many philosophers prefer to distinguish relativism per se from extreme versions, typically called radical relativism in the positive sense, or nihilism in the negative sense (Stout 1988). Radical (also called extreme) relativism states that all truth and related claims are equally correct; nihilism is the view that nothing is knowable. These statements are different from standard relativism, which makes the humbler assertion that our criteria for judgment are inescapably context-bound. Radical relativism and nihilism are, in other words, God's-eye views that float over contexts, rendering them as patently universalistic and nonrelativistic statements in their own right. Many

commentators thus consider these extreme versions to be logically self-defeating (Margolis 1986; Krausz 1989a). Indeed, defenders of relativism take care to distance themselves from these extremes as well; thus Catherine Elgin states, "The pluralism and relativism I favor do not lead to the conclusion that anything goes. If many things are right, many more remain wrong" (1989:98). Relativism is thus a domain of multiple but finite truths, bounded on one side by absolutism, where truth is one, and on the other by its self-contradictory extremes, where either all is equally true or there is accordingly no meaning to truth.

Perhaps it is thus better to consider not whether, but to what extent, a particular epistemological position embraces relativism, as some milder versions appear to be less of a threat to truth-statements than others. Relativism, on this view, is not limited to its excessive interpretations typically accorded to it as standard. Many of the rejections noted above of relativism by social constructivists are, clearly, rejections of strong relativism, not its milder forms.

Up to now, this discussion has muddled the difference between epistemological relativism (the focus of this paper), which concerns truth-statements, and moral relativism, which concerns value-statements. Epistemological and moral relativism are somewhat independent, though it is not always easy to suggest how.[18] As suggested in the introduction, however, what I find important is the way in which many normative pronouncements by environmentalists are justified by facts; this makes epistemological relativism of fundamental moral relevance as well.

Critical Realism: Mild Relativism, Deep Nature

The perspective which allows us to reclaim reality for itself . . . to reclaim it from philosophical ideologies—such as empiricism or idealism—which have tacitly or explicitly defined it in terms of some specific human attribute . . . I call critical realism (Bhaskar 1989:vii).

Realism is not committed to the adulatory reification of particular existing sciences . . . any more than to that of particular theories and methods within them. Its claim is the weaker but important one that ontological commitments, whether of general epistemologies or of specific scientific theories, are inescapable and have to be taken seriously (Outhwaite 1987:118–19).

There are real differences between how people construe fishes, but this is a wholly different matter from how a fish is physically constructed (Dickens 1996:73).

Realism: Empiricist and Critical

Epistemological relativism is a central problem taken up by critical realists; yet the term "realism" itself first requires some clarification. Realism points to a constellation of philosophies, all of which posit the existence of something, in distinction to nominalist, idealist, and other antirealist positions. In its contemporary usage, realism usually refers to the ontological proposition that reality exists independent of our ideas of it, and the epistemological proposition that this reality is, to some significant extent, knowable.[19] One widespread form of realism is empiricism, the view that reality is knowable through direct experience. Empiricist realism would assert that our observations of nature, gathered via remote sensing, field measurements, and everyday experience, ideally represent nature as it "really" is; to determine whether a concept of wilderness is true or not, then, one seeks some form of empirical verification. Truth to empiricist realism is therefore a matter of correspondence to reality.

Over the last several decades, however, a more epistemologically sophisticated form of realism has been developed—variously termed theoretical, transcendental, scientific, representation/reflection theory, and increasingly, *critical* realism—precisely to distinguish it from empiricist realism. In fact, as suggested in the first epigraph above, critical realism arose in large part as an explicit rejection of positivism and its empiricist philosophy, especially as applied in the social sciences.

The central tenets of critical realism also arise largely from the work of Roy Bhaskar, though other scholars, primarily British, have played an important role as well.[20] Bhaskar's approach has been extended by social scientists, including Russell Keat and John Urry (1982) and William Outhwaite (1987). Its influence in geography has been substantial (Cloke et al. 1991), attributable in large part to the work of Andrew Sayer (1992). Though Sayer and others are generally quick to note that critical realism is primarily a philosophical position and does not entail necessary theoretical commitments or topical foci, its solid foothold in geography is probably a result of its congruence with certain critical structuralist

theories prevalent in human geography such as Marxism (Gregory 1994). Critical realist geographers have often put forth their philosophy as an antidote to postmodernist thought (Sayer 1993) and its "drift toward relativism" (Gandy 1996:23).

Critical realist approaches generally share a common story of their epistemological position. A standard version is presented by Keat and Urry (1982), in which critical realism can be best understood as an attempt to move beyond both classic empiricism and the more recent conventionalist critique (in which realists include, among other perspectives, postmodernism and certain forms of pragmatism). The epistemologies inherent in empiricism, conventionalism, and critical realism differ in their account of the realm of human knowledge and the nature of truth. For empiricism, true ideas (e.g., those obtained by science) are objectively based, whereas for conventionalism these ideas are social conventions; "truth" is thus a subjective (or intersubjective) phenomenon to conventionalists. The critical-realist position attempts to include the ontological assertions of empiricism as well as the epistemological concerns of conventionalism: ideas are social concepts that have an ontological basis but are understood via a particular, socially predisposed framework. Knowledge to critical realists is neither wholly objective nor subjective but is in fact the result of interaction between subject and object. For critical realists, the truth-content of different ideas can be compared on a relative basis: some (social) explanations are more adequate representations of reality than others, though all are, by virtue of the dialectic (subject-object) nature of knowledge, always "partial truths."[21]

This argument is developed further by the realist philosopher Sean Sayers (1985). Sayers turns the social construction of knowledge on its head, arguing that it is by virtue of social ideas that reality is grasped, though their truth-content may vary widely: "Truth and falsehood are matters of degree. All ideas reflect reality, but only more or less adequately" (p. 176). He cites an optical example: reality can be either focused or obscured by a lens, but it remains true that the lens is the only way to understand reality. But how do we know whether a particular lens focuses or obscures reality? Sayers argues "Experience, practice, is the test of truth." Knowledge, he suggests, is the result of the historical interaction of theory and experience: the former suggests the relevance

of the so-called "coherence" criterion of truth ("does it make sense?") espoused in rationalist accounts, whereas the latter implies the same for the "correspondence" criterion ("does it match experience?") favored by empiricists.

On these accounts, critical realism squares with a mild form of relativism. Recognizing the social construction of knowledge does not, for critical realists, entail a necessary capitulation to radical and nihilistic forms of relativism, though naive absolutism is forever dismissed, as knowledge is an interaction of subject and object. Critical realism is a sort of acknowledgment that direct access to a preordered reality is impossible and that knowledge is always fallible and incomplete, coupled with an optimism that this admission need pose no fatal blow to the project of finding better explanations for reality.

Critical realism is not, however, an epistemology alone; it is perhaps even better known for its ontological commitments. Largely following Bhaskar, critical-realist ontology involves a stratification model of reality. In Bhaskar's model, reality consists of the domains of the real, the actual, and the empirical (1975). The latter is the world we experience; it is, operationally, the limit of reality according to restrictive forms of empiricism present in some positivist approaches to science. The actual domain is the realm of events, not all of which are experienced by people. The real domain is that of generative mechanisms or structures responsible (in conjunction with contingent conditions) for events, which themselves are unobservable. Structures are defined by Sayer as "sets of internally [i.e., necessarily, not contingently] related objects or practices" (1992:92). Critical-realist ontology thus involves a denial of atomism, the notion that events are merely contingently related. Its focus on underlying structural causes of phenomena would also lead to a materialist interpretation of different ideas of nature. In other words, the epistemological question, "Which truth-claim is more adequate?", is joined by the ontological question: "What kinds of historical/geographical structural relations and contingent conditions have combined to result in this diverse set of truth-claims?"

Critical Realism and Nature

Critical realism has been applied to the realm of nature by scholars such as Ted Benton (1993), Peter Dickens (1996), and Kate Soper (1995).

Though wilderness is mentioned somewhat less in these writings than by pragmatists, as will be seen below (and reasonably so, given critical realism's geographical lineage), critical realists' philosophical interests regarding nature nonetheless strike to the core of the problems raised by social constructivism.

Kate Soper's account of constructivism mirrors the dual critique of empiricism and conventionalism noted above in the context of the epistemological clash between "ecological" and postmodernist perspectives on nature (1996). Though both are directed toward a critique of modernity, they speak of radically different concepts of nature implicated in modernity:

> The contrast, crudely, is between discourses which direct us to the "nature" that we are destroying, wasting and polluting, and discourses that are focused on the ideological functions of the appeal to "nature" and on the ways in which relations to the nonhuman world are always historically mediated, and indeed "constructed," through specific conceptions of human identity and difference (1995:3–4).

One important contribution Soper provides is an extension of critical-realist ontology to the realm of nature. Soper adopts a stratification model of reality in distinguishing between three senses in which "nature" is invoked in ecological discourse. As a metaphysical concept, nature is implicitly that which is separate from culture, thus that "through which humanity thinks its difference and specificity" (Soper 1995:155). As a realist or "deep" concept, nature "refers to the structures, processes and causal powers that are constantly operative within the physical world" (p. 155). As a "lay" or "surface" concept, nature refers to "immediate experience and aesthetic appreciation" (p. 156). The latter two run parallel to Bhaskar's distinction of the real and the empirical. Soper mentions wilderness in her discussion of lay nature, though later notes, "While 'ordinary' discourse about nature may be less than precise, it is also speaking to sentiments that it is as mistaken to overlook as it is to ignore the ideologies they generate" (1995:182). Wilderness, on this view, is interestingly ambiguous in that it has the appearance of an empirically obvious thing though in fact capable of rather strong ideological tainting.

Peter Dickens specifically tackles the tension between realism and constructivism in ways of thinking about nature. As with other critical realists, he distances himself from empiricist realism by arguing that, "All concepts have evolved from human societies. Therefore all knowledge must in some sense be a social construction" (1996:71). Yet this admission does not make Dickens a pure constructivist. He cites, for instance, the debate in sociology between a constructivist (Tester 1991) and a realist (Benton 1993) over whether a fish is really a fish or the term "fish" is a socially defined category, defending the realist position as suggested in the epigraph above.

In explaining his position, Dickens differentiates, citing Dittmar (1992), between strong and weak social constructivism. Strong constructivism "denies the importance of nature as an object external to human experience" (Dickens 1996:73). Weak constructivism "recognises that all knowledge is socially constructed, but it would argue that some abstractions can be extremely robust forms of social constructionism, in the sense of standing the test of time" (p. 73). Dickens links the latter with critical realism, citing as an example Darwin, whose ideas clearly arose from and influenced those of his Victorian capitalist era, yet whose "social construction" of evolution has stood the test of time, even though it is today being significantly modified by other social constructions. Dickens credits strong constructivists with pointing out the ways in which knowledge and power coexist and how opposing nature to culture has drastic impacts on women, nonwestern cultures, and nonhumans, all of whom have been associated with forms of "pure" nature as are found in the concept of wilderness. Yet what is important to him is that ontology should not be buried in epistemology; he closes, for instance, by critiquing the strong constructivist position of MacNaghten and Urry (1995), citing again "the distinction between the real causal powers of nature and the ways in which academics and other theoretically well-informed people understand or interpret nature" (Dickens 1996:82–83). In this respect, Dickens invokes Bhaskar's epistemic fallacy, a reduction of reality to our knowledge of it, in criticizing strong forms of constructivism.

Some Problems

The influence of critical realism may have peaked in social science in the later 1980s, when postmodernism made more serious inroads. One possible reason may be that critical realism was sufficiently general and vague so that everyone

agreed with it at some level, leading Pratt to ask of geographers "Are we all realists now?" (1995:61). Indeed, critical realists are not alone in searching for epistemologies that acknowledge constructivism but deny strong relativism. For instance, Dickens's account of weak constructivism in epistemologies of nature is quite similar to the "constrained constructivism" of Katherine Hayles's account of knowledge (1991) and concepts of nature (1995), or the "constrained relativism" that informs one geographic study of institutional and biophysical dynamics in the Himalayas (Thompson et al. 1986). This middle ground is thus not the exclusive domain of critical realism.

One may reasonably ask whether the postmodernists and others are right when they accuse critical realists of overconfidence in the ability of humans to know reality (e.g., Barnett 1993; Hannah and Strohmayer 1993). The realist view of knowledge is castigated by these critics as "an article of faith, or at least of optimism," in contrast to postmodern thought, where "Bound within the world, yet freed from the arrogance that would have the world equally beholden to us, we can finally begin to encounter mute materiality" (Hannah and Strohmayer 1993:363–64).

This problem is apparent in Dickens's argument. He is quick to note the distinction between reality and knowledge—between, as quoted above, "real causal powers of nature" and "ways in which . . . people . . . interpret nature," though this distinction sounds exactly like that made in anticonstructivist arguments. The question becomes: what, indeed, is the difference between critical realism and the empiricist realism of anticonstructivists? In spite of their differences, critical realists share with empiricists a high degree of confidence in the possibility of establishing truth.

Given this proclivity to assert reality over our ideas of it, critical realism is by no means the best vehicle to interpret divergent truths as viewed from the contexts in which they are generated, versus as explained in terms of their generative structures. Empirical relativism is unavoidable in light of competing social constructions of nature; understanding contestations over reality, whether from an epistemologically relativist or antirelativist viewpoint, requires interpretive sensitivity as well as analytical depth. Critical-realist analysis stands the danger of reductionism to the extent that it attempts to explain reality purely in terms of underlying structures. As a reframing of the possibility for science, critical

realism can downplay, perhaps even ignore, the personal ironies and messy contingencies that play such a major role in conflicts over nature.

If the above limitations of critical realism are valid, what is ideally called for is an approach that is more clearly defined, somewhat less epistemologically confident, and perhaps more geared toward taking messy reality seriously. The latter two of these qualities are found at the core of pragmatism, though, as I will argue, pragmatism suffers even more than does critical realism in being rather loosely defined.

Pragmatism: Relativist Agnosticism, Plural Nature

> Pragmatism (good sense): Never having to say you're certain (Stout 1988:297).

> The pragmatic does not have a theory of truth, much less a relativistic one. As a partisan of solidarity, his account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one. Not having *any* epistemology, *a fortiori* he does not have a relativistic one (Rorty 1989:38).

> Pragmatists cannot tolerate theoretical delays to the contribution that philosophy may make to environmental questions (Light and Katz 1995b:4).

> Perhaps it is time to just give the whole matter [of relativism] a rest (Weston 1992:174).

Which Pragmatism?

As a lay concept, pragmatism is readily defined, yet as a philosophical perspective it is somewhat more difficult to establish. The dictionary definition of pragmatism emphasizes its focus away from theory and speculation to action; the Greek word *pragma* means deed. This suspicion regarding theoretical debates runs through pragmatism as a major undercurrent. The term "pragmatic" is thus widely used in the lay sense to mean a focus on practical issues or practical, workable means to accomplish a desired end.

Yet is pragmatism simply a methodological proposition without any particular philosophical (e.g., epistemological) tenets? Some pragmatists, at least, clearly distinguish their approach as philosophically based (for an example related to environmental pragmatism, see Parker 1995:21). In this same manner, Jeffrey Stout distinguishes

real pragmatism from "vulgar pragmatism," the "whatever works" approach of "consequentialism applied to mental acts; the view that cost-benefit calculation is the ultimate language of rational commensuration . . . the doctrine that the essence of knowledge is problem-solving capability" (1988:297). Other pragmatists, however, are less committed to defining pragmatism in philosophical terms: Cornell West, for instance, sees the core of pragmatism as "a future-oriented instrumentalism that tries to deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action" (1989:5). Indeed, West's book on pragmatism is titled *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, where philosophy is viewed in an abstract and foundationalist sense.

In contrast to critical realism, pragmatism has not been courted extensively in geography (Wescoat 1992). Those treatments by geographers that do exist primarily emphasize philosophical as well as methodological tenets. James Wescoat, for instance, notes how the work of Gilbert White shares many of the philosophical features of Dewey-style pragmatism; the four themes he develops include the precariousness of existence, a conception of inquiry as following upon problematic situations, the importance of learning from experience, and a commitment to public discourse (1992). Another example is an editorial by Jody Emel espousing "provocative pragmatism" (1991). Emel's primary object of critique is the tendency within radical theory to render restorative action incomprehensible, as problems become too structurally embedded to conceive of any possible solution. Emel argues, "Theories are not truths but tools. Explanation and diagnosis are encouraged to focus down to levels where transformation can occur" (p. 389). More recently, Leslie Duram has adopted pragmatism as a framework for research in agricultural geography that can ultimately help geographers deal with "real-world environmental concerns by focusing on the practical consequences of ideas and actions" (1997:203).

Philosophical pragmatism is generally agreed to flow from a discrete set of American scholars, including Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, through to more recent philosophers such as Hilary Putnam and Jeffrey Stout.[22] Pragmatism is subject to various definitions (Lovejoy 1963) and arrangements of intellectual lineage (e.g., Was Peirce the central figure? Dewey? Did Emerson inspire the movement

[West 1989]?). It has its neo- and paleo-versions (Clayton 1993; Westbrook 1993).

Yet there are recurrent features. Richard Rorty, perhaps the most prominent contemporary spokesperson for pragmatism (if not the most representative),[23] offers three characteristics as central (1982:162ff.). The first is that pragmatism is "anti-essentialism applied to notions like 'truth,' 'knowledge,' 'language,' 'morality,' and similar objects of philosophical theorizing" (p. 162). The correspondence theory of truth is thus roundly rejected by pragmatists, according to Rorty, as indeed are all theories as to the essential characteristics of truth (cf. Alcoff 1996).[24] The second characteristic of pragmatism Rorty offers is that "there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any metaphysical difference between facts and values, nor any methodological difference between morality and science" (p. 163). Is and ought are not, for pragmatists, the qualitatively distinct realms they are commonly held to be in lay and scientific discourse, a point with significant implications for the linkage between epistemologies and ethics of nature (Parker 1995; Rosenthal and Buchholz 1995; Santas 1995). Pragmatism's third characteristic, according to Rorty, is "the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers" (p. 165).

Pragmatists who make statements about epistemology often focus not so much on truth as justification, i.e., the conditions under which we ought to accept that x is true. In one such account, D. S. Clarke argues that what is distinctive about pragmatist justification is that purely epistemic criteria are not sufficient; rather, "justification must in part be given relative to the actions for which the accepted proposition serves as a basis and to purposes these actions fulfill" (1989:20). This, Clarke argues, is the basis of the famous saying by William James, "the true is the useful." Clarke, however, extends this rather blatant conflation of epistemology and methodology by inserting a risk-benefit calculus in which one compares potential costs of being wrong against costs of acquiring further evidence, a "good enough" criterion of acceptance. Following this approach, then, the pragmatist is justified in accepting a proposition as true without making any

foundationalist or correspondence-based claims about truth.

Though pragmatists have often been accused, by critical realists and others, of embracing relativism, few if any pragmatists would agree. For instance, the communitarian Philip Selznick argues that the pragmatic viewpoint is anything but relativistic (1992:115–16), and quotes Richard Bernstein as supporting the view that pragmatism leads more to a pluralist approach, for reasons central to the pragmatist project:

> Pluralism for the pragmatists never meant a self-enclosed relativism where we are forever doomed to be prisoners limited to our own conceptual schemes, frameworks, or horizons. . . . Long before the current fascination (obsession?) with radical incommensurability, Dewey was aware of the danger of the type of degenerate pluralism that would block community and communication (1987:521).

Perhaps no other pragmatist has been labeled as a relativist more so than Richard Rorty. In summarizing Rorty's position on relativism, I should admit that it is sometimes hard to determine whether or not to take him at his word. He is the kind of philosopher known for rhetorical flourishes, word-bites, and likely exaggerations that, in combination with his fairly prodigious output, have probably played a major role in securing for him the status of one of today's most prominent pragmatists. Indeed, even radical pragmatists generally give him philosophical, if not political, acclaim (e.g., Fraser 1989).

Rorty has published a number of important books on pragmatism and how it differs from foundationalist accounts of reality (1979, 1982, 1991). It is impossible, in the space allotted here, to do justice to this literature; I will instead focus on one essay in which he explicitly contrasts himself with realists, and addresses the relationship between pragmatism and relativism (1989). This essay, "Solidarity or Objectivity?", appeared (among other places) in an edited collection on the subject of relativism (Krausz 1989b), and served as the first essay in his book *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Rorty 1991). Rorty has a curiously loaded definition of realists and pragmatists, though much of his argument echoes that of D. S. Clarke, presented above:

> Those who wish to ground solidarity in objectivity—call them "realists"—have to construe truth as correspondence to reality. So they must construct a metaphysics which has room for a special relation between beliefs and objects which will differentiate true from false beliefs. They also must argue that there are procedures of justification of belief which are natural and not merely local. . . . By contrast, those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity—call them "pragmatists"—do not require either a metaphysics or an epistemology. They view truth as, in William James's phrase, what it is good for *us* to believe. . . . Insofar as pragmatists make the distinction between knowledge and opinion, it is simply the distinction between topics on which such agreement is relatively easy to get and topics on which agreement is relatively hard to get (1989:36–37).

Rorty lists three aspects of relativism as generally used (pp. 37–38): (a) every belief has equal validity, (b) there is no one criterion for truth, and (c) one can say nothing about truth outside of descriptions of procedures of justification used in one's own society. The third, "ethnocentric" view is that of the pragmatist, not the "self-refuting" first view nor the "eccentric" second. Rorty, however, disputes that meaning (c) should be called relativist, since on his pragmatist account, relativism is a *negative* argument, namely that there should be *no* distinction between knowledge and opinion. As suggested in the epigraph above, Rorty finds the notion of relativism nonsensical with respect to pragmatism, since on his view, pragmatism has no epistemology. Rorty's is thus a strongly agnostic view of the problem of relativism.

Pragmatism and Nature

Pragmatism has, in the last several years, received considerable interest in environmental philosophy, though mostly as applied to normative versus specifically epistemological concerns. One philosopher who has considered implications of a pragmatist ethics for a variety of problems is Anthony Weston. Weston argues that pragmatism leads to a reframing of ethics from focusing on "puzzles"—discrete problems that have definite solutions—to "problematic situations," in which a great deal more creativity is called for to find "integrative strategies" that respond to the common ambiguities, complexities, and fuzzy boundaries involved in many real-world predicaments (1992). Weston acknowledges that this approach may lay his pragmatism open to charges of relativism. His position, however, is that pragmatism renders critique an "inside job," one that does not refer to some Archimedean point outside society. To Weston, "Our chief

critical resources lie within every community's traditions and values, even resources for radically challenging the community's prevailing values and practices themselves" (1992:169). Weston's argument suggests again the pragmatist's agnostic position on relativism: his approach is not so much antirelativistic as a sense that it is the wrong problem to worry about.

Another philosopher who has explored links between pragmatism and environmental problems is Bryan Norton. In common with methodological pragmatists, Norton sees the philosophy "not as a set of metaphysical principles, but as a method" (1991:x). Norton pins his pragmatic approach to a call for pluralism, for a recognition of the existence of a diversity of values in contemporary environmentalism. Norton's pragmatism leads him to see the differing philosophical strands of environmentalism, such as those hearkening back to John Muir's preservationism and Gifford Pinchot's conservationism, as actually converging in common policy objectives as regard pressing environmental problems. That is, what looks to most philosophers like an unbridgeable gap between the positions of different factions of the environmental movement is to Norton more of a healthy diversity of values which all support broadly similar goals. Questions of relativism in environmental debates become largely irrelevant, following Norton's account.

Pragmatist accounts of nature such as Norton's, due to their methodological bent, are not full responses to the social-construction-of-nature argument. Norton's emphasis is on policy conflicts between different factions of environmentalism and the extent to which they can reach policy consensus. One could, for instance, imagine consensus being achieved over wilderness protection among groups of environmentalists with rather different agendas (Weston 1992:123), but this does not challenge the possibility that "wilderness" itself is a social construction that is, on James's account, "true" only to the extent that it is a *useful* concept to support environmental protection. Indeed, though Norton acknowledges that wilderness is defined in a cultural context (1991:57), and not everyone thinks of nature as wilderness (pp. 155ff), in the last analysis, he succumbs to the same sense of wilderness-as-other that was criticized by Cronon, citing it toward the close of his argument as one pole of a nature/civilization continuum: "At one extreme is wilderness, the ultimate test of our culture: Can we halt the dash toward civilization, and save

nature itself, the wildness that is the origin of our existence, at least in a few places?" (pp. 248–49).

One recent multiauthored volume that applies pragmatism to the realm of nature is *Environmental Pragmatism* (Light and Katz 1995a). The volume represents a rich collection of essays on pragmatist thought (e.g., Hickman 1995; Parker 1995) and its relevance to contemporary environmental problems, including wilderness protection. Some allusions to wilderness in *Environmental Pragmatism* invoke an epistemology that stresses practical interaction with nature: for instance, Larry Hickman maintains that Dewey would probably have supported wilderness protection primarily to provide valuable data to scientists (1995:68), and Anthony Weston argues that wilderness as totally separate from humans is in some ways not as "real" as wild places as encountered by humans (1995a:153). Another discussion in the volume suggests that a pragmatist perspective would best support wilderness protection in specific situations versus in general (1995b:302), though some pragmatist support for wilderness preservation in the abstract is possible (Light 1995:332).

What, then, is environmental pragmatism, as suggested in these and other examples found in the volume? As summarized by the editors, four forms of environmental pragmatism are represented (Light and Katz 1995b:5). The first considers applications of classical American philosophical pragmatism to environmental problems. The second concerns inquiries into practical strategies for closing gaps between stakeholders in environmental-policy disputes. The third addresses theoretical perspectives that can provide consensus among environmentalists. The fourth involves arguments favoring moral pluralism in environmental theory.

These approaches to environmental pragmatism clearly span its methodological and philosophical dimensions, yet it is difficult to detect one overarching message running through the essays. Indeed, the editors' introduction offers a strongly methodological account of pragmatism, arguing that "Environmental ethics must develop for itself a methodology of environmental pragmatism—fueled by a recognition that theoretical debates are problematic for the development of environmental policy" (Light and Katz 1995b:2), and in a later passage, "The pragmatist [objective] is toward finding workable solutions to environmental problems now. Pragmatists cannot tolerate theoretical delays to the contribution

that philosophy may make to environmental questions" (p. 4). In a comment, one of the editors, Andrew Light, clarifies his position by contrasting "philosophical" and "metaphilosophical" pragmatism (1995:330ff). Philosophical pragmatism entails specific philosophical (e.g., epistemological) commitments, whereas metaphilosophical pragmatism is more a pluralism-endorsing perspective on philosophical exchange. Metaphilosophical pragmatism, in other words, is methodological pragmatism as applied to philosophical debate, a sense that pluralism is necessary for true exchange of ideas and resolution of philosophical conflict. Light counts himself as squarely metaphilosophical—though sometimes philosophical—in his pragmatist inclinations. It is apparent that methodological pragmatism runs as a major thread through contemporary applications of pragmatism to nature.

A Critical Assessment

This all-too-brief review raises several questions about pragmatism in relation to relativism. The first concerns what exactly pragmatism is. Though the editors of *Environmental Pragmatism* maintain that it "is clearly a distinct and identifiable perspective in and for environmental philosophy" (Light and Katz 1995b:5), Thomas Lovejoy's thirteen separate defensible pragmatisms appear to belie this statement (1963). As if the directions taken by neopragmatism weren't enough, the founding fathers of the movement displayed considerable diversity over basic points such as the necessity and content of pragmatist metaphysics (Parker 1995:24). Thus, defining "the" pragmatist perspective on relativism becomes an elusive project.

Most significantly, though there are major exceptions as noted above, it is not always clear whether pragmatism is anything more than a methodology. This may have serious implications with respect to relativism. From one angle, it could mean that pragmatism embraces empirical relativism as just a symptom of pluralism: all perspectives are right in their own way. From another angle, it could mean that pragmatism tacitly adopts dominant discourses in a decidedly unrelativistic manner.

Pragmatists need to take greater pains to distance themselves from the "vulgar pragmatism" denounced by Stout. The great bulk of environmental policy today is motivated by what Neil Evernden derided as "resourcism"—a crude extrapolation of instrumentalist logic to the nonhuman realm, all done in the name of pragmatic environmentalism (1985). By not defining itself carefully, philosophical pragmatism slips over to methodological pragmatism, which itself slips over to vulgar pragmatism in its lesser moments. Pragmatism as such lacks what Michael Bruner and Max Oelschlaeger have called a "critical rhetoric" (1994:388–89).

One major reason philosophical pragmatism lapses over into the lesser attributes of methodological pragmatism is that it is decidedly ambivalent about theory. As suggested above, some pragmatists present theory as secondary to and disconnected from practice. But surely this is an inadequate conceptualization of the relationship between theory and action—and action is a major pragmatist concern. Theory, far from being unrelated to actual events, is necessary to inform our understanding of these events and point to necessary components of a workable solution. If there is insufficient formulation of what the problem is (as informed by theory), then solutions cannot ultimately do what they are intended to do. Pragmatist agnosticism about relativism then is symptomatic of a larger agnosticism about theoretical matters.

Indeed, critical realists have taken some forms of pragmatism to account primarily for their relative inability to make critical, theoretically informed pronouncements on reality (e.g., Outhwaite 1987:24–26 et passim). If making claims on reality involves the form of objectivity Rorty caricatures, the impossible God's-eye view of things, then pragmatists are wise to steer away from this naive form of realism. Yet Bhaskar, after acknowledging with pragmatists the necessity of avoiding the "ontic fallacy" of considering reality to be so transparent that knowledge is collapsed onto it, nonetheless argues that Rorty (and by default, other pragmatists who adopt similar positions) commit the "epistemic fallacy" of doing precisely the opposite—that is, of reducing ontology to epistemology, being to knowledge, reality to our construct of it (Bhaskar 1989). If critical realism could be criticized for being rather too epistemologically confident in its reality claims, pragmatism could likewise be criticized for being too epistemologically tentative.

Conclusion

> It is thus not truth that varies with social, psycho-
> logical, and cultural contexts but the symbols we
> construct in our unequally effective attempts to
> grasp it (Geertz 1973:212).

> [The dread of relativism] is unfounded because the
> moral and intellectual consequences that are com-
> monly supposed to flow from relativism—subjectiv-
> ism, nihilism, incoherence, Machiavellianism,
> ethical idiocy, esthetic blindness, and so on—do not
> in fact do so and the promised reward of escaping its
> clutches, mostly having to do with pasteurized
> knowledge, are illusory (Geertz 1989:12).

Though Clifford Geertz was not speaking ex-
plicitly with reference to nature, he could have
been, both in his 1973 realist mood as evidenced
in the first epigraph above, and in his "anti-
antirelativist" mood in the 1989 quote following.
As suggested in his dramatic about-face, social
constructivism tends to induce polarized re-
sponses. Yet many geographers of nature have
found these polarities to be unacceptable. For
instance, David Demeritt, in his comparative as-
sessment of environmental history and contem-
porary cultural geography, rejects both the
realism of the former and the arch-constructivism
of the latter (1994b), while I. G. Simmons unen-
thusiastically presents realism and idealism as the
two prevailing choices one has in light of the
social-construction-of-nature argument
(1993:159).

It is against this backdrop of polarized and
unattractive options, options that work to divide
scholars of nature rather than provide a meeting-
ground, that critical realist and pragmatist theory
may have something to offer. They largely arise
from different sides of the Atlantic and in re-
sponse to different philosophical concerns, but
their recent aim is quite similar: to avoid the
Scyllan grip of empiricist objectivism, while navi-
gating around the Charybdian whirlpool of sub-
jectivism and strong relativism. Indeed, at a
fundamental level, they share a common suspi-
cion of the subject-object dualism that undergirds
many of these polarities, as geographers of both
persuasions have testified (e.g., Sayer 1992:75ff.;
Wescoat 1992:589).

Yet their paths from this common point of
departure have diverged. For their part, pragma-
tists have adopted a deliberately agnostic position
on the relativistic implications of the social con-
struction of nature. In their better moments,

pragmatists take to heart a deflationary account
of truth as espoused by their founders, a position
Jeffrey Stout calls "modest pragmatism." Modest
pragmatism, which resides somewhere between
the impossible "God's-eye view" of objectivity on
one end and nihilism on the other, "stops short of
the temptation to define truth" (1988:249ff).
Pragmatists emphasize process over product, and
as such, find relativism and other philosophical
positions often to be beside the point. Critical
realism adopts a different tack. It reformulates
ontology and epistemology in nonatomistic,
nonempiricist language to clear the ground for
reality claims that avoid strong relativism, arguing
that social constructivism need not lead to sub-
jectivist excess. Critical realism is a fine-tuned
extension of the Enlightenment project, and as
such is unabashedly prepostmodernist in its en-
dorsement of science as a fallible but critically
important project (e.g., Outhwaite 1987:119).

In my estimate, then, pragmatists and critical
realists are, among other things, of different tem-
peraments and inclinations. They look at the
world in philosophically different ways: following
Anne Buttimer's rubric (1993), pragmatists tend
to conceive of the world as an arena of relatively
disconnected events, whereas critical realists
view the world as a mosaic of forms underlying
specific events. Pragmatists and realists, then, are
interested in different orders of reality: pragma-
tists find significance in the realm of the empiri-
cal, whereas critical realists seek to identify the
structural conditions responsible for particular
empirical events. Pragmatists are happier with
lower-order truths than critical realists in large
part because truths at this level are often more
immediately useful. Pragmatists are looking for
workable solutions to problems; they are tired of
theoretical battles—such as that between rela-
tivist and antirelativist interpretations of nature—
that loom large in higher-order epistemological
controversies, and have little inclination to step
into the fray. Critical realists, in contrast, place
much greater value on correct conceptualization
of problems as a necessary first step in solving
them, leading them to seek higher-order, struc-
tural truths to help explain the empirical situation
of interest. Critical realists of Marxist and similar
persuasions are decidedly uneasy with solving
problems at the immediate level, because they
feel these smaller-scale solutions often ignore im-
portant larger truths. Critical realists, then, are
much more interested in making grander truth-
claims, though they realize that problems of

relativism tend to magnify as scale and abstraction increases, and hence take theoretical battles very seriously.

These differences suggest that pragmatists and critical realists could learn something from each other. Critical realists could learn a little epistemological humility from philosophical pragmatism, the understanding realists share but often forget that, beyond the scale of immediate, noncontroversial truth-statements, knowledge is indeed highly partial and fallible, and that we had better not stake everything on it. To take to heart the social-construction-of-nature argument, to admit all that we really do not, and will never, know, signals not so much a capitulation to relativism as a spirit of finitude. Pragmatist epistemology, however, works better to inject a healthy degree of doubt and reflexivity in our epistemological claims than to provide a basis to make these claims. This is the terrain of critical realism. Pragmatists know, but could be reminded by critical realists, that nihilism and aphasia are not inevitable consequences of the admission that a God's-eye view of the world is impossible. They could also be cautioned against the kind of naiveté that accompanies their tendency to take existing truth-statements at face value, granting them de facto validity. Pragmatism could thus stand a bit more of a critical context. It is quite possible, for instance, that not all environmental problems can be solved, that many are too deeply entrenched in social and human-environment relations to change in the timespan of interest to pragmatists. A critical-realist analysis may, in other words, be the best way to suggest to pragmatists what can and cannot realistically be done—a very pragmatic consideration.

I do not believe for a moment, however, that pragmatism and critical realism could be readily merged in geography, nor should they, as they represent different moments in the arc that traces a path beyond constructivism's relativistic excesses. Geographers have long gotten used to accepting their internal differences as potential strengths; perhaps this is where they have the most to contribute to the social-construction-of-nature debate, given their tremendous philosophical diversity. I thus do not wish to suggest that we create yet another philosophical "ism" in geography—perhaps a "critical pragmatism" or a "pragmatist realism"—as these merged terms suggest a nondynamic blending of the two approaches which denies the very strength that resides in their dialectical tension.

Let us, then, return to the example of external nature, the biophysical world we inhabit, in exploring ways in which pragmatist and critical-realist approaches may jointly point out a path through the polarities that commonly characterize responses to the social-construction-of-nature argument. Consider, again, wilderness. Both reality and social construct, wilderness represents the best and worst of our imaginings of autonomous nature, and also points through our imaginings to the natural processes responsible for life in all its diversity—processes that have been significantly impacted by differentiated human practices on the face of the earth. The hyperrealist and hyperconstructivist would have little tolerance for each other's epistemological interests in wilderness, but the critical realist and the pragmatist could, I believe, appreciate the need for each other to the extent that they recognize their own shadows—the limitations of their respective positions.

Imagine a critical realist interested in "wilderness" as relatively nonhumanized landscapes. This individual would, in explaining its ecological characteristics, maintain a healthy skepticism regarding Clementsian notions of nature as communities-in-equilibrium, yet remain equally aware that more recently prevalent individualistic, chaotic, and disturbance-driven notions of nature have their social basis as well (Worster 1990; Barbour 1995). As one result, a critical-realist inquiry into natural ecosystems would probably proceed from a dialectical perspective on the role of individual organisms vis-à-vis their communities in a manner analogous to Bhaskar's transformational model of social activity, which links individuals and society in a mutually constitutive manner (1986: 122ff.). A pragmatist natural scientist may, however, proceed rather comfortably from the more empirically derived and policy-implementable perspective that nonhumanized landscapes consist of relatively independent species, each with its own habitat requirements (for one example pertaining to vegetation dynamics, see Webb 1987). This latter perspective, in contrast to that of the critical realist, would consist of more modest, closer-to-the-surface truth-statements capable of direct implementation in management—indeed, a good deal of biogeography and conservation biology has largely followed this trajectory (e.g., Myers and Giller 1988; Caughley and Gunn 1996). The strength of each perspective is the shadow of the other: the pragmatist approach is less contextually

sensitive and may lack the ability to explain higher-order relations among species, whereas the critical-realist approach may lack the ability to deliver policy-implementable truths due to its dialectical complexity.

Now imagine a pragmatist interested in "wilderness" as an overriding policy focus in contemporary environmentalism. This person would probably be well aware that there are historical, social, and political reasons for environmentalism's wilderness emphasis, as well as for contemporary opposition to this emphasis among those of a more environmental-justice perspective (Di Chiro 1995). The pragmatist's epistemological interest may be less in deciding whose version of nature is "closer to the truth" than in identifying practically derived truths both sides share, truths that may help build coalitions to support both nature protection and social justice (e.g., Weston 1995a:153). The critical realist, however, may be more driven to note the ideological embeddedness of wilderness protection, and search to identify structural processes potentially responsible for the imperilment of both nature and marginalized peoples (or that set one against the other), than in immediately looking for epistemological closure between differing perspectives on wilderness (e.g., Benton 1993:66ff.; Soper 1995:155ff.). To those of a critical-realist bent, a more robust environmental policy must ultimately be built on these deeper truths—as many contemporary ecofeminist and Marxist accounts jointly argue (e.g., Plumwood 1993; Harvey 1996). Here, too, each position is a shadow of the other: pragmatism may achieve laudable, though limited, policy ends, whereas critical realism's truths are more illuminating than immediately useful.

To the extent that either side recognizes its own shadow, there is no necessary reason why these differing perspectives cannot complement each other, as they both offer important truths about nature, albeit at different levels. Indeed, the main epistemological contribution pragmatism and critical realism offer together is their ability to speak truth across a spectrum of relevant scales. The same social-construction-of-nature argument that, among other inclinations, leads pragmatists to lower their truth-sights, leads critical realists to search deeper for more robust truths.

This joint response constitutes in my mind a far more adequate reply to the social-construction-of-nature argument than the level of vehement, hyperrealist denial one typically encounters. It also is far more adequate than

taking constructivism to the opposite extreme: in its stronger versions, social constructivism represents a pendulum swing away from the ontologies, epistemologies, and moralities connected with the environmental determinism of a century ago, and ironically falls into the same traps. As Nicholas Entrikin has warned in a recent review of social constructivism in geography: "The preoccupation with the social in discussions of place and region threatens to replace a long-disavowed natural reductionism with a social reductionism" (1996:219).

Yet Foucault's well-known charge, "Truth is a thing of this world. . . . Each society has its regime of truth" (1980:131), speaks to an undeniable political and cultural thread in the fabric of reality as we represent and evaluate it. To dismiss this charge as relativistic greatly simplifies its import, as relativism is generally apprehended as an all-or-nothing concept. Properly understood, however, some degree of relativism is undeniable. Pragmatists and critical realists alike admit that all knowledges are bounded and partial; yet they both, in a sort of tense complementarity, point to ways that geographers and others whose business and concern it is to represent nature can still have something to say.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Not all contributors to the volume equally shared this sentiment; thus essays like those of Soulé (1995)and Shepard (1995) stand in contrast to the much more conciliatory essay of Hayles (1995). For a better conceptualization of the deconstructionist project of Derrida and others, see Bennington (1993).
2. The epistemological emphasis commonly given to social constructivism has been challenged by David Demeritt, who argues that social constructivists ought to focus more on scientific practices that produce "truths": "Such a narrow focus on epistemological questions simply feeds the unfortunate sense that social constructivism presents an exclusive choice between objectivity

and relativism" (1996:486). Demeritt contends that social constructivism will be much more understandable, believable, and useful if it sets aside "unresolvable" debates over truth and instead emphasizes specific material practices, and attendant realms of power, that produce scientific knowledge. While I am in agreement with Demeritt's philosophical and political unease concerning overly idealistic implementations of social constructivism (i.e., those that ignore how truths arise from practices), I still maintain that the product of science (its truth-claims) requires further epistemological clarification in light of the constructivist challenge, and this clarification will not be entirely provided by focusing on the process of science alone.

3. See, for instance, Williams (1980); Olwig (1984); Bird (1987); Latour (1988); FitzSimmons (1989); Burgess (1990); Haraway (1991); Oeschlaeger (1991); Wilson (1992); Bennett and Chaloupka (1993a); Evernden (1993); Lynch (1993); Milton (1993); Simmons (1993); Harrison and Burgess (1994); Cronon (1995b); Robertson et al. (1996).

4. One of the best-known early defenses of relativism was ascribed by Plato to Protagoras, who lived in the second half of the fifth century BCE. Protagorean *homo mensura* ("man" is the measure) relativism has generally been understood as a form of ethical subjectivism, in which evaluative descriptors such as "true" or "right" become "true for me" and "right for me" (Lacey 1986:206–08; Angeles 1992:261).

5. See, for instance, Kurtz (1994); Rothman (1994); Salmon (1994); Teller (1994); Parsons (1995).

6. For critical appraisals of Putnam's approach, see Sosa (1993) and Forster (1994). Nancey Murphy also navigates between pragmatism and realism in her account of science and religion (Murphy 1993). For their part, however, critical realists have generally lumped pragmatists into the same category as other "conventionalists" (see, for instance, Keat and Urry 1982; Outhwaite 1987).

7. For a critical review by one geographer of postmodernist deconstructionism, see Marden (1992); a recent perspective emphasizing questions of nature is presented by Matthew Gandy (1996:31). The position of Andrew Sayer, a well-known critical realist, on postmodernism is summarized in Sayer (1993), followed by a somewhat heated exchange among Sayer, Clive Barnett, and Matthew Hannah and Ulf Strohmayer (all 1993; see *Antipode* 25:4, pp. 345–69). Many, though certainly not all, features of pragmatism and postmodernist philosophy overlap (Shalin 1993). In addition, postmodernism and relativism should not necessarily be conflated. One defense of postmodern subjectivism against relativism has been provided by Agnes Heller (1990:7–8); a forceful distinction between postmodernist morality and ethical relativism is offered by Zygmunt Bauman

(1994:14–15). Indeed, the common notion that postmodernism is inevitably committed to a rejection of grand narratives has been forcefully disputed by Arran Gare, who offers a new "polyphonic" grand narrative of nature (1995).

8. The clash between wilderness advocacy and critique is, in fact, nowhere more apparent than in the juxtaposition of this article with a Sierra Club ad immediately following, "No Wild, No Wildlife" and featuring a picture of a polar bear and a description of the Arctic Refuge in Alaska under threat of attack by the oil industry. The ad ends, "The Sierra Club works to save wildlife by saving the wilderness."

9. Not all assessments of the idea of wilderness, it should be noted, are unilaterally critical; see, for instance, Nash (1982) and Oeschlaeger (1991).

10. Cronon, perhaps unsurprisingly, was not asked by the editors of *Wild Earth* to respond to these criticisms, though he did in another forum (1996).

11. See Proctor (1998) for further discussion of the problem of nature-culture dualism.

12. This dualism is problematic on both sides, whether in the ways that social constructivism can be incorrectly understood as a separation of the social from the physical (Gerber 1997), or in the ways that the philosophically naive doctrine of objectivism serves important political ends in geography (Jones 1995) and elsewhere. See Proctor (1998) for further discussion.

13. David Demeritt correctly suggests that this misunderstanding of constructivism's epistemological emphasis is at least in part the fault of social constructivists themselves, who have not always been careful to distinguish their argument from a more ontological constructivism (1996:486).

14. As but one example involving a scholar sympathetic to constructivism, Donna Haraway argues in her most recent work, *Modest Witness@Second Millenium.FemaleMan© Meets OncoMouse™*, that the position she and others working in feminist science studies take has been caricatured as relativistic, but is decidedly not so (1997:301 fn. 12).

15. One exception is a provocative article by David Nemeth (1997), in which he criticizes the poststructuralist reading of science provided by Dixon and Jones (1996) as insufficiently relativistic—a far cry from how the authors expected most readers to react (Dixon and Jones 1997).

16. The term "context" may or may not infer the existence of distinct conceptual frameworks, which some philosophers hold to be logically impossible (Davidson 1982; Krausz 1989a:1–2).

17. One other way to understand the opposition of rationalism and relativism is the sense provided by Matthew Gandy, in which the two represent modernist and postmodernist extremes, respectively (1996:30).

18. Bernard Williams has differentiated between the realms of "the scientific" and "the ethical" in

terms of whether or not they converge in social discourse (1985:136). Descriptive claims, Williams observes, are shared more commonly than normative claims; this empirical observation thus leads us to proceed with caution in conflating the two realms. Most people would hence probably agree with Timothy Lukes that epistemological relativism is less secure than ethical relativism (1977). Yet others have argued that the distinction is not ironclad (e.g., Eagleton 1991:17).

19. The term realism in fact covers a variety of propositions, not all with significant epistemological dimensions; thus, for instance, Bruno Latour (1993:85) differentiates between realism and constructivism on wholly ontological terms (i.e., the extent to which mixing of nature and culture is acknowledged), and some philosophers have been exploring the possibility of moral realism, "the view that there are moral facts which we can discover" (Sayre-McCord 1988:ix).

20. In a series of publications stretching back two decades, Bhaskar has carefully developed a position first called transcendental or scientific realism, and more recently critical realism (1975, 1979, 1986, 1989). Bhaskar conceives his realism as a philosophy *for* and not merely *of* science; one preface states, "The essays collected in this volume all seek to *underlabour* . . . for the sciences, and especially the human sciences, in so far as they might illuminate and empower the project of human self-emancipation" (1989:vii). For summary descriptions of Bhaskar's realist philosophy, see Outhwaite (1987:20ff.), Cloke et al. (1991:134ff.), and Pratt (1991, 1995:63–66). Yet not all self-avowed critical realists trace their lineage in this manner; one recent monograph (Dolby 1996) develops a "critical realist" perspective on science without even one reference to Bhaskar, an omission I find almost impossible to comprehend.

21. The term "partial truths" has been used by James Clifford (1986) to refer to ethnographic writing. Clifford asserts that ethnographies are all partial truths, not in that they are partly false as well, but that they are, by virtue of the fact that they are interpretations, "committed and incomplete."

22. One excellent bibliography of primary and secondary sources is found at the end of *Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson* (Murphy 1990).

23. Bhaskar has taken on Rorty on multiple occasions, though primarily "as emblematic of postmodernism" versus pragmatism (1991:139).

24. Jeffrey Stout cautions that Rorty and other pragmatists sometimes slip into essentialism by offering negative statements, e.g. "Truth has no essence." Stout considers antiessentialism to be best understood as methodological nominalism: "The methodological nominalist is free to have views about truth or justification, beliefs useful in arguing against traditional philosophical theories, provided they do not go beyond the kinds of claims that can be warranted by empirical inquiry and linguistic reflection" (1988:252).

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