FROM THE GREEN BOOK TO THE RIVER: LEWIS, RELATIVISM, AND CONSTRUCTIVISM IN EDUCATION

Carla Alvarez on the Shortcomings of Constructivism

Looking for an endorsement, a publisher sent an elementary grammar textbook to C.S. Lewis for review. What he read within, based as it was on a relativistic worldview, so disturbed him that it prompted the essay, *The Abolition of Man.* Unfortunately, the ideology within what he called *The Green Book* did not end with its authors, whom Lewis referred to as Gaius and Titius. It has spread from isolated pools of educational theorists to an inundation throughout the academic landscape,

from curricula in the classroom to academic conferences and think tanks. Always looking for the next new idea, modern educational thought has become enamored with itself, ignoring the outcomes which disprove its validity.

What is At Stake

A half a century ago, Lewis warned his fellow British academics that the acceptance of the ideology in *The Green Book* would certainly lead to "the destruction of the society which accepts it."[1] His warning was true just as it is true for us in the United States today as the fabric of our nation is dependent upon an educated and engaged populace. As G.K. Chesterton observes in *Orthodoxy,* the foundation of the democratic process is based on "an attempt to get at the opinion of those who would be too modest to offer it."[2] In a country whose governing institutions are based on the assumption that it is "of the people, for the people, and by the people,"[3] all its people must be capable of participating in charting its course rather than a select few.

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[1] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001). 27.

[2] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Image Books. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2001). 124.

[3] Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address," November 19, 1863, accessed February 1, 2018, http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm.

The importance of fighting to create a society that agrees on the existence of objective truth is especially true for Christians. We have a Savior who engages and interacts with us through experience in the physical world, but he also calls to us through reason. Christ, as Michael Ward points out in *Heresies and How to Avoid Them,* is Truth personified.[4] Those who seek Truth seek him. It is hard to witness to the salvation of Christ as Truth if the one to whom we are witnessing has been conditioned in the classroom that there is no truth outside of their own construct of reality. Because of this paradigm shift towards relativism, the dynamics of evangelism have dramatically changed in the past two decades as Nancy Pearcey explains in *Saving Leonardo.* Rather than demanding evidence for the truth claims of Christianity such as "the existence of God or the deity of Christ or the

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[4] Stanley Hauerwas, *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why It Matters What Christians Believe*, ed. Ben Quash and Michael Ward (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007). 141. "Truth, first and foremost, is not an 'it', not a proposition, but a person, who will always elude over-precise descriptions. Jesus Christ is the one with whom we have to do. We avoid heresies and we avoid the dangers associated with orthodoxy because we have encountered him in his Spirit and because we hope to encounter him one day face to face in the kingdom of his Father."

resurrection," offense is taken that Christians assert that there is any truth at all.[5]

Relativism as Constructivism

The ideology Lewis warned of is widespread in modern education. The idea that truth is subjective has taken form in education as constructivism where the current buzzwords in educational thought include "individualized learning" where students learn in "innovative" ways by "constructing" knowledge[6] based on their existing information frameworks. However, as Barbara Jaworski notes in a review of *Constructivism in Education*, education does not involve students alone but rather it is "fundamentally about students and teachers and the process of teaching."[7] Pedagogy is a two-way process. Information is transmitted to the student, and the teacher must be able to discern if

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[5] Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo: A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals, and Meaning*, First Printing edition. (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2010). 31.

[6] Brent Muirhead, "Creating Concept Maps: Integrating Constructivism Principles into Online Classes," Instructional Technology & Distance Learning 3, no. 1 (January 2006): 17–30, http://www.itdl.org/journal/jan_06/article02.htm.

"Knowledge depends on past constructions. We know the world through our mental framework and we transform and interpret new information through this framework."

[7] Barbara Jaworski, "Steffe, L. P.; Gale, J.: Constructivism in Education," *ZDM - The International Journal on Mathematics Education* 30, no. 2 (April 1998): 52.

that information has been received and understood. In his discussion "The Meanings of Truth," Thomas Aquinas reasoned that for a thing to be investigated, there must be absolute truth apart from and outside of the individual and the state of being, otherwise "all science and knowledge of things would perish."[8] Regardless of educational ideology, an effective teacher is one which can both engage the students' interest and modify their teaching to the students' unique needs and learning styles. While both are "student centered," practical constructivism ranges from focusing on the characteristics of all forms of effective teaching which incorporates feedback from the learner and what Aquinas would call the "diverse ways"[9] in which a particular truth can be understood to radical constructivism which operates on the basis that <u>all</u> knowledge is subjective and reality is "*objectively unknowable.*"[10]

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[8] Thomas Aquinas, *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, ed. Ralph McInerny, 3rd printing edition. (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1999). 166.

[9] Ibid. 184.

[10] Sorin Cristea, "The Fundaments of Constructivist Pedagogy," <u>Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences</u> 180 (2015):760.

"The study object specific for constructivist pedagogy is represented by the **difference** existing between: a) the *neural-biological and psychical sys*tem of the trainee (pupil, student, class attendant etc.) and of the *educator* (teacher), which create the premises for education, instruction, learning; b) *external reality* (external environment) which

The relativist approach to education of constructivism is presented as a novel and forward thinking approach. Rather than being a 21st century innovation, we see Lewis decried it in the mid-twentieth; however, it goes further back than this. Five centuries before the birth of Christ Protagoras made the claim, "man is the center of all things." He believed knowledge was, as Gaius and Titius later claimed in *The Green Book*, based on the interpretation of the observer. It was this sophistry which Socrates argued against in a dialogue titled *Protagoras* and strongly refuted. He argued that reality, truth, and principles themselves are objective and absolute. Man's perception can misconceive reality, but it does not change it. Not only does the learner have an obligation to seek the most correct understanding of the truth, but ignorance is equated with evil. This is in opposition to the view of radical constructivism.

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influence, by different *perturbations and impulses*, education, instruction, learning, at which the one who learns reports actively, subjectively, by all his cognitive and noncognitive resources. *The external reality, objectively* unknowable, is *subjectively* reconstructed by valorizing a *specific normativity* and the elaboration of *specific concepts* applied at level of *specific research methodology."*

Constructivism and the Teacher

While constructivists identify with the Socratic method as it incorporates the same practices of "eliciting relevant preconceptions, clarifying preconceptions, testing one's own hypotheses, and deciding whether to accept the hypotheses or propositions,"[11] the incompatible difference between the Socratic method and radical constructivism is that the former begins with the assumption that there is truth to be found. In the Socratic Method, the learner begins in the position of seeker, one who is searching for the true and who is ready to lay aside previous misconceptions. In radical constructivism, the learner continues to build out their own position regardless of whether or not that position is worthwhile.

The position of a teacher is one who has an understanding of a particular objective truth and whose role is to transmit that truth effectively. However, in an ideology where truth can be constructed and is subjective to the learner's own perspective, the logical conclusion of this position is the elimination of the necessity of a teacher. This is

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[11] Faith Lam, "The Socratic Method as an Approach to Learning and Its Benefits" (Carnegie Mellon University, 2011), accessed February 1, 2018, 1. http://repository.cmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1126&context=hsshonors.

seen in the current educational landscape where constructivism is the foundational mindset, the position of teacher is not only devalued but seen as superfluous. Technology is considered a valid substitute for personal transmission, the focus is on student "outcomes" as data points rather than the enrichment and engagement of a human being, and teachers are seen as nothing more than a distraction from the purpose at hand.[12]

It is not only "individualized learning," but "individualized truth." A student conditioned in

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[12] Note: The claim constructivists believe teachers can be replaced with technology may seem far-fetched; however, it actually played out in the Douglas County Independent School District in Colorado. Along with a series of other district actions, the position of teacher was so devalued that administration saw the portrayal of a teacher in front of a classroom as completely unrepresentative of the district. Below is the text of a response to an approval request for a promotional piece by then DCISD superintendent Elizabeth Fagen. The email was obtained through a Freedom of Information request by Douglas County parents.

Elizabeth Fagen, "Re: Flat Earth Promo," June 25, 2015, accessed January 31, 2018, http://douglascountyparents.com/fagen-move-the-teacher-to-the-side/.

"The one thing that bothers me is that we have a teacher in front of the class with a book…that's the anthesis [sic] of us and what we aspire to offer our kids. :) So…can that visual either move the teacher to the side without the book or just have kids with robot? I think it's a key moment. :)"

Under Fagen's direction, the educational philosophy was strongly constructivist. See commentary on a district sponsored article by Rick Hess on EdWeek titled "Douglas County: The Most Interesting District in America?" dated September 18, 2013. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rickhessstraightup/2013/09/douglascountythemostinterestingschooldistrictin_america.html

constructivism can easily believe that their position is the correct one regardless of all evidence to the contrary because in the constructivist approach, all information is interpreted through their own perceptions and existing knowledge. If one of the common goals of an educational system is to create "global citizens"[13] and "good communicators," a

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[13] Note: A "Portrait of a Graduate" statement is something currently promoted by educational consultants as necessary for schools to define. A small sampling a statements:

Spring Branch ISD: Complex and Creative Thinker and Communicator https://cms.springbranchisd.com/students/For-Students/Graduation/Portrait-of-a-Graduate

Mountain View High School: " . . . students build strength and confidence as Communicators, Collaborators, Global Citizens, Creative Critical Thinkers and Goal Directed Individuals." https://mountainviewhs.fcps.edu/announcements/portrait-graduate-mtv

Maumee Valley Country Day Schools: The district highlights three desired characteristics: enlightened, compassionate, and contributing global citizens. https://www.mvcds.org/page/our-vision/portrait-of-a-graduate

Grapevine-Colleyville Independent School District: The district five desired characteristics are: skilled problem solvers, effective communicators, collaborative workers, global citizens, and self-regulated learners.

http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:hpDvE-9i6GIJ:www.gcisd-k12.org/Page/31769+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us

Fairfax County Schools: good communicators, collaborators, global citizens, creative and critical thinkers, and self-directed and responsible individuals.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/fairfax-school-board-to-vote-on-portrait-of-a-graduate-

constructivist mindset undermines that goal. A community is that in which individuals come together for a common goal and purpose. Communication is achieved through the transmission of ideas and concepts through agreed upon language. If we cannot begin on common ground and discuss differences of opinion with an assumption that there actually is a point of agreement that can be reached, we condemn ourselves to living on isolated islands either in contention or domination of another. As Lewis notes, "For the power of Man to make himself what he pleases means, as we have seen, the power of some men to make other men what *they* please."[14] Citizenship is about community. When we talk about citizenship, it should mean there is a coming together in agreement on certain truths.

The Purpose of Education

When examining which educational approach has the greatest validity, we must first look at the

concept/2014/09/17/aa00b542-383a-11e4-9c9f-ebb47272e40e_story.html

Humble Independent School District: Humble's six targeted competencies are: good communication skills, critical thinking, creativity and innovation, collaboration, personal responsibility, and global
citizenship. http://www.ourtribune.com/index.php/headlines/18383-humble-isd-rolls-out-dream-team-s-portrait-of-a-graduate-2

[14] Lewis. 59.

purpose of education itself. The purpose is to teach a person what he should know, to inform where there was once ignorance, and to enlighten what was once dark. Aquinas describes the gaining of knowledge and thus education itself is achieved by the "assimilation of the knower to the thing known."[15] Louis Markos in *Restoring Beauty* notes that "children need guidance in judging what is right and wrong, wise and foolish, just and unjust."[16] It is not enough to simply have a thought about something. We must have right thoughts about that thing in order to have true understanding. It is very easy to believe that one has knowledge about a particular thing and yet, when all is said and done, miss the point entirely. The more unfamiliar a topic, the more important it is to have a guide, a teacher, to navigate the new terrain of knowledge, one who not only understands the subject matter, but can identify and bridge the gaps in one's own understanding. Who one is taught by can make all the difference.

Isolation in Constructivism

However in a constructivist setting, the student's existing knowledge is given precedence and all new

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[15] Aquinas. 167.

[16] Louis Markos, *Restoring Beauty: The Good, The True, and The Beautiful in the Writings of C.S. Lewis* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica Publishing, 2010). 108.

learning must conform to what is already known. Rather than the educational setting being a place where, as Lewis states, students learn and enter into a "little portion of the human heritage,"[17] parts of the greater community, individuals are seen as "shut operational systems, auto-referential."[18] There is no coming together in a community of shared knowledge and understanding, because in constructivism reality is subjective, the individual experience and understanding reigns supreme. The ideology is in complete opposition to what Lewis refers to as the "Tao," which he defines as "the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are."[19] Constructivism is the indoctrination of relativism and is based on what Paul Boghossian refers to as "equal validity"[20] of ideas. If we believe all ideas are equally valid, there is no cause to examine our own. Rather than searching for the true, the right, and the best, it instead becomes a war

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[17] Lewis. 11.

[18] Cristea. 760.

[19] Lewis. 18.

[20] Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, First edition. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). 5.

of opposing ideas where whomever can impose "their truth" wins.

An Illustration of the Consequences of Constructivism

While Lewis and Boghossian argue against relativism and the precepts of constructivism philosophically, "The River" by Flannery O'Connor presents a dramatic illustration of the dangerous consequences of learning in an entirely self-referential system. The story begins with a boy, Harry, being given over without handkerchief or breakfast to the care of a Mrs. Connin for the day whom he has never met. Neglectful, his parents were in a habit of handing him from sitter to sitter and so accustomed is he to this sort of treatment, he accepts the state of affairs passively, "like an old sheep waiting to be let out."[21] Harry is an example of a child which, as Lewis describes in *The Abolition of Man*, needs "to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity."[22]

This excursion begins to awaken Harry's curiosity. It is the start of his educational process. Mrs. Connin, by exposing him to the new experiences

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[21] Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*. Reissue edition. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971). 185.

[22] Lewis. 14.

of her world, is one who is "irrigating the deserts"[23] of Harry's bleak life as Lewis would say. Harry learns through firsthand experience that pigs were not actually "small fat pink animals with curly tails and round grinning faces and bow ties."[24] He learns from Mrs. Connin that he "had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ"[25] and not, as he previously believed, "a doctor named Shadewell."[26] It was an exciting day for Harry and he discovered "you found out more when you left where you lived."[27]

These new experiences and concepts are completely outside of his previous construct of the world. As Harry and Mrs. Connin walk through the idyllic setting of the red clay highway making its way among the honeysuckle and through the woods to the river to hear a preacher believed by Mrs. Connin to be a healer, Harry, who began the day "bumping his feet together as if he had trouble walking,"[28] begins to "make wild leaps and pull forward . . . as if he wanted to dash off and snatch the

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[23] Ibid.

[24] O'Connor. 161.

[25] Ibid. 163.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid. 161.

sun."[29] His passivity has transformed into active interest. His "desert" has been watered and he is primed for the input of a teacher.

At the river meeting, Harry encounters the earnest young preacher, Bevel, who is intent upon bringing his listeners to the redemption of God. Among their fellow listeners are a woman who claims she saw the preacher heal, even though Bevel stated he had not, and the incongruously named Mr. Paradise, the local skeptic and gas station owner. Each character has their own "construction" of reality: Mrs. Connin with her simple faith; the woman who believes indiscriminately without supporting evidence or testimony; Mr. Paradise who believes nothing; and Bevel the preacher for whom beliefs are all important. There is no mediation between the competing worldviews. In a gathering that is supposed to be about communion, there is none. Each person is occupying the same location; however, there is no agreement. There is no shared truth or coming together because each has constructed their own reality and no one is interested in stepping outside of their creation.

In the middle is the boy, Harry. While Mr. Paradise looks on and mocks, the preacher urges his followers to "lay their pain . . . In the rich red river of

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[29] Ibid. 164.

Jesus' blood."[30] A river which, as the preacher tells his listeners, "goes on . . . slow to the Kingdom of Christ."[31] At the urging of Mrs. Connin, Harry is baptized by the preacher and realizes that "this was not a joke."[32] He seemed to have stepped into the real world, one that was solid and with meaning. He had come from a world where he was discarded to one where, as the preacher assured him, he counts. This flood of new information is overwhelming to him. Nothing in his life before has prepared him, he has no framework through which to process these new ideas. He came from a home where everything, including himself, was a joke, to one where words and actions are of utmost importance. He went from one where life was superficial and pedantic to one where transcendent truths are presented in metaphor. Lewis states, the "right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments"[33] but because Harry has never been taught right from wrong or what matters from what is irrelevant, he is left without grounding. He is both without his own discernment and without a discerning guide.

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[30] Ibid. 165.

[31] Ibid. 166.

[32] Ibid. 167.

[33] Lewis. 14.

He is takes information and interprets it based on his previous experiences and knowledge, which was limited. As Mortimer Adler points out in *How to Read a Book*, "Thinking is only one part of the activity of learning. One must also use one's senses and imagination. One must observe, and remember, and construct imaginatively what cannot be observed."[34] Harry does this in spades; however, learning is just one part of the educational process. The second part, the teacher, is just as important as the recipient of the instruction. His mind went from a parched desert to a wild "jungle"[35] sprouted from the seeds planted by all of these competing ideas. It is a learning completely unguided, without pruning or training by an experienced hand. His self-guided synthesis of these various presentations of truths results in a fatal outcome.

"The River" ends with the death of Harry. Back with his parents in his home of neglect, Harry decides to return to the river . . . alone. Remembering the preacher's words that the river led to the Kingdom of Christ, a place where he counts, he finds his way back to the place where the door to this new world had opened and he "intended not to fool with

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[34] Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*, Revised edition. (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1972). 14

[35] Lewis. 14.

preachers any more but to baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river. He didn't mean to waste any more time."[36] Eschewing a guide completely and confident in his own interpretation, he threw himself into the river determined to reach his destination, leaving Mr. Paradise arriving too late to save him, "staring with his dull eyes, as far down the river line as he could see."[37]

The Falsity of Constructivism

Harry's belief that he could ride the river to the Kingdom of Christ as he would a train to a stop did not make it true. There was objective truth that he missed. In our post-modern society, we hesitate to speak in absolutes, but as Pearcey writes,

> . . . To say that something is objective does not mean that everyone agrees, or that you know it for certain. It only means that it is capable of being true or false. If you are working on a complex mathematics problem you may not be certain you have the right answer. But you are certain that there *is* a right

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[36] O'Connor. 173.

[37] Ibid. 174.

answer,   not   merely   personal
preference.[38]

Fundamentally, we all know this to be true. We take jobs and enter into contracts based on the confident understanding that all parties agree that an hourly rate is based on an hour that is made up of 60 minutes and 360 seconds paid for with dollars that are the equivalent of 100 U.S. cents. When a student studies medicine, her future patients are not interested at all in what that would-be doctor's "perception" is about human anatomy, the patient wants to know that the person who holds their life in her hands has been trained and educated according to the latest and best medical practices. There is a universal standard to be upheld.

Fragmentation versus Integration

O'Connor's Harry is a little boy without guidance or training. He finds himself in a community which is populated by those who are more than ready to share their own beliefs, but yet are unconcerned with the impact those beliefs have on those around them. Some of the beliefs were true; however, they were transmitted without regard for how the hearer received them. Quoting Catholic philosopher Louis Deupre, Pearcey writes,

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[38] Pearcey. 29-30.

> The central challenge of our age . . . is the lack of any integrating truth. "We experience our culture as fragmented; we live on bits of meaning and lack the overall vision that holds them together in a whole." As a result, people feel an intense need for self-integration.[39]

It was this search for self-integration, for meaning, and his role in it which Harry sought when he immersed himself in the river. He had caught a glimpse of part and was searching for the whole.

To Love Truth

> "Listen, said the White Spirit, " Once you were a child. Once you knew what inquiry was for. There was a time when you asked questions because you wanted answers, and were glad when you had found them. Become that child again, even now." [40]
> - C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

Childhood is a time of inquiry, of exploration, and of growing into knowledge. The goal of education, whether the person is to become a plumber or a physicist, should above all teach the student how to recognize truth along with equip

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[39] Ibid. 44.

[40] C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1973). 41.

them with the tools to discover those truths. Radical constructivism is an enemy to that endeavor poisoning the wellspring of inquiry. To the question so famously asked by Pontius Pilate so long ago, "What is truth?" constructivism answers "Whatever you want it to be." Nothing can stand upon the shifting foundation of the constructivist, not an educational system, not a society, nor a faith. We must agree that there is truth that is beyond us as individuals which we can be united in agreement when it is reached.

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