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Nigel Mackay
University of Wollongong, nigel_mackay@uow.edu.au

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ON SOME ACCOUNTS OF MEANING AND THEIR PROBLEMS[1]

Nigel Mackay

ABSTRACT. A number of influential theorists in psychotherapy and psychology rightly argue that meaning is central to psychology. However, they ground this insight on further claims that persons autonomously create meaning and reality; and that a constructivist, antirealist, postmodern philosophy offers justification for the centrality of meaning. These further claims are mistaken. They confuse two different psychological phenomena, both called *meaning,* symbolic meaning and meaning as salience. The latter, the meaning usually of concern to psychotherapy, is a relation between a person (specifically motives) and objects. It results from the interaction between persons and objects relevant to their motivational interests. It is part of the real, determinate world and in principle scientifically investigable. The argument that meaning is part of autonomously created realities is incoherent. Further, antirealist, postmodern constructivism depends on the realist assumptions about facts, truth and objective knowledge that it denies. The genuine insights of the meaning-making movement require a realist account of knowledge, truth and objectivity.

1. The Importance of Meaning

Psychotherapists see themselves as helping professionals and, concerned as they are with freeing individuals from their psychological burdens, they favour theories of human action that have regard for persons, their beliefs, wishes and perspectives. A major theme of the now dominant cognitive, cognitive-behavioural and allied therapies—the centrality of cognitions in the genesis of psychological

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distress—promotes just this examination of the person's perspective and beliefs, the 'internal world'. The focus of psychotherapy has moved from how objective conditions may control and be manipulated to alleviate symptoms, to the ways in which persons' perceptions of their world generate, and may be adjusted to alleviate, pathology. At the same time a number of writers from inside and outside psychology have presented more radical critiques of mainstream psychology (including psychotherapy and clinical classification) and analyses of social processes (including psychotherapeutic processes) from constructivist and social constructionist standpoints. Constructivism offers personal agency as the source of action, and social constructionism offers social discourse as constituting mind and action. Both reject the objectivism of traditional empirical psychology.

It is against this background that a theme that has always existed on the margins of psychology—most famously articulated in Victor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1964)—has developed into a flood of writings on the primacy of meaning and meaning-making in therapy and human conduct. Though it comes in many different forms, the theme of this literature is that human actions, including pathology and its remediation, are shaped by the meanings that events have for persons, or are created in discourse, rather than being determined by their objective features. To deal with this (how persons construct meaning and reality), psychology and psychotherapy require a non-objectivist metatheory. My concern here is with certain general features of this work, whose epistemological position and attendant ontology are incoherent and poorly serve the worthy humanistic aims that inspire the literature.

2. Some Cautions

I need to set out some cautions before presenting my argument. Much of what I say below is a critique of the constructivist metatheory that is called on to justify the importance of meaning. Neverthe-

less, my principal aim is not to survey and criticize constructivisms and constructionisms as such. Rather, I wish to clarify what can be sensibly understood by meaning in the psychotherapeutic context, and to consider what does and what does not constitute a proper metatheoretical foundation for the focus on meaning.

Moreover, presenting a critical analysis of this literature is particularly difficult. First, the writings represent so wide a variety of theoretical positions and therapeutic orientations that it would seem impossible to collect them in a single, coherent category, or that any critique could apply to most of them. To cite only select examples from this large literature, they may come from: developments in cognitive (Lyddon, 1995; Lyddon & Weill, 1997; Martin & Sugarman, 1996) or cognitive-behavioural therapy (Meichenbaum, 1995); personal construct psychology (Epting & Neimeyer, 1984; Kelly, 1955; Viney, 1996); social constructionist reflections on therapeutic practice (Gergen, 1994, 1996; Gergen & McNamee, 2000; Hallam, 1994; Wiener & Marcus, 1994); narrative therapies, both psychodynamic (Crossley, 2000; Sepping, 1999; Spence, 1982) and non-dynamic (Drewery, Winslade, & Monk, 2000; McLeod, 1997; Rosen, 1998; Russell & Wandrei, 1996); psychoanalysis, notably in the legacies of Gill (1994; Gill & Holzman, 1976), George Klein (1976) and Schafer (1976), but also more widely (Barclay, 1993; Brook, 1995; Cohler, 1992; Loewus, 1998); the counselling literature (D'Andrea, 2000; Neimeyer, 1998); family therapy (McFadyen, 1997); or marriages, combinations and revisions of these (Larner, 2000; Soldz, 1988, 1996; Westerman, 1986). Indeed, many of the works cited above cross over theoretical and disciplinary boundaries. Further, they may draw general metatheoretical inspiration from one or more of an equally diverse range of sources: from Gergen, Hayek, Kant, Kuhn, Rorty, Vico, Wittgenstein, and many others. In using 'constructivism' to refer to common ideas in various personal constructivist and social constructionist theses (except where I wish to point to certain differences), I am neither suggesting that these latter positions are identical, nor that each contains only one variety.

Danziger's (1997) review of the *Inquiries in Social Construction* series (Gergen & Shotter, 1992–), for example, indicates well the range of social constructionisms. Similarly, there are several kinds of constructivisms (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996b), and various authors (Gergen & Gergen, 1991; Stam, 1998) discuss the constructivism–constructionism distinction. I am, however, following major writers in the meaning-making literature who appeal to constructionist and constructivist principles, as well as the themes they have in common. There is also at work here what Freud (1921/1959) so nicely called the "narcissism of minor differences" (p. 101), which leads authors to differentiate themselves sharply from their kindred, and magnify their divergence from otherwise similar psychologies of meaning. Yet, as I will try to illustrate, many differences, though genuine, are often metatheoretically inconsequential because there are deeper, shared conceptual problems that render all the contrasted positions seriously flawed. To foreshadow points I will discuss later: from the viewpoint of a conceptual critique, there is little consequence in arguing for the social or discursive rather than the personal nature of meaning construction if both are troubled by a common, unsound account of knowledge, or in claiming immunity from the accusation of antirealism because one is a 'social constructionist realist' if the latter is in self-contradiction.

A second problem for the critic accompanies the one above. Being largely psychotherapeutic rather than philosophical, the meaning literature is not overly concerned with clear definition and consistency, and it presents a poorly delineated target. It is a large, loose literature using many different psychological vocabularies with all the eclecticism of those whose interest is mostly therapeutic practice. Making a selection of what I believe is a representative (in its philosophy rather than in its practice) group of works, it may be thought that I am oversimplifying the case against which I argue, and that what I say does not deal with more sophisticated positions. Yet my target is a kind of argument, informed, as I hope to show, by a set of epistemological and ontological assumptions. And while I

will illustrate its presence in a number of important theoretical writings, the first judgement to be made here is whether my criticisms of this argument are correct or not, only secondarily how widely my critique applies beyond the borders of the necessarily limited number of works I can cite in evidence. My belief is, however, that the elements of the position that I criticize are indeed present in a very large set of writings, including the more sophisticated versions, even if these differ from one another in other more or less important respects. And in support of this, it is just because it is so present that, repeatedly, in the interests of presenting themselves as a new paradigm or movement, influential authors can identify themselves as part of a meaning-focused "postmodern family of therapies" (Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000b, p. 3), or Rosen and Kuehlwein (1996) can collect authors whose works lie in the intersects of psychotherapy and, variously, narrative psychology, constructivism, social constructionism, postmodernism, developmental constructivism, epistemology and social discourse analysis and identify their common focus as meaning-making. (See also similar identifications in Held, 1995b; Lyddon, 1995; Lyddon & Weill, 1997; McNamee & Gergen, 1992b; Rosen, 1998; Schreiner & Lyddon, 1998).

A third difficulty in criticizing the meaning-making literature is that because much of it is in reaction to the orthodox empiricist view of psychology, there runs through it a hostility to the canons of argument and evidence, and to the 'outmoded' concepts of truth, reality and objective knowledge that are assumed to have failed with the empiricism that embodied them. A critique relying on these concepts, as I contend (and try below to show) it must to make any point at all, may be dismissed as merely exemplifying the very objectivism that the meaning-making literature does not (it self-contradictorily claims) accept. Even the self-contradictory nature of certain theses argued by the meaning-making authors itself provides, as I will also illustrate later, a 'defence' against criticism: for each claim targeted by the critic of constructivism there are, in the endemically inconsistent literature, likely to be examples of

counter-claims that can be used to show that the critic has misread the position.

3. Psychotherapy, Constructivism and Postmodernism

A good distillation of the meaning-making literature appears in Neimeyer and Raskin (2000a). This volume comprises the "responses of 24 leading constructivist, narrative, and social constructionist scholars and therapists to an invitation to articulate their approach to clinical disorder" (Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000b, p. 3). Their number includes Arciero and Guidano, Efran and Cook, Gergen and McNamee, Goncalves, Leitner, Mahoney, Neimeyer, Raskin and others. Their responses are clearly identified by Neimeyer and Raskin by the metatheoretical principles they have in common. That is, though the differences between positions are real enough, they press a common argument to justify their focus on meaning.

Neimeyer and Raskin (2000b) point out that the meaning-making approaches are part of a postmodern family of therapies through their common questioning of "the assumptions that undergird the 'establishment', including much of psychiatric classification systems; through their 'repudiation of traditional ontological assumptions'; and through their opposition both to the objectivism of traditional therapies that attempt to adjust clients to an objective, 'single, supposedly stable, and in principle knowable' reality, and to the discourse of scientific research that serves to legitimize these therapies" (p. 5). Despite differences between family members, including such important ones acknowledged by Neimeyer and Raskin (p. 6) as that over the social versus the individual sources of meaning and the diversity of social constructionisms, psychologists of meaning-making see symbolic acts as representing "a matrix of meaning that actually constitutes the reality in which one positions oneself" (p. 5), and see psychotherapy as a conversation that transforms clients through engagement in their (inter)personal matrices of meaning (p. 8). This view of psychotherapy is promoted as mean-

ingful, liberating, optimistic, egalitarian, self-critical, reflective, tolerantly pluralist and opposed to the oppressive styles of much traditional therapy. These virtues are argued to flow from, and depend on, the ontological and epistemological theses of constructivism (within which term I include views that range from personal constructivism to social constructionisms), which is in turn a postmodern position.

These themes go well beyond this particular collection. A brief survey of any of the several thousand publications thrown up by a psychological literature search on key words psychotherapy, meaning and postmodern indicates why Neimeyer and Raskin are justified in seeing this as a species of approach and as increasingly influential. Psychologists of many kinds present therapeutic and other observations as evidence of the construction of meanings, and argue that the justification for this is a constructivist account of knowledge and reality. In as much as constructivism is an elaboration of the "cognitive turn" in psychology (Mahoney, 1995a), it is in tension with the computational, information-processing metaphor that dominates experimental, and is sometimes taken as the core of cognitive-clinical, psychology. However, various influential theorists (Bruner, 1990; Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000a; Neisser, 1993) and psychotherapists (Arciero & Guidano, 2000; Mahoney, 1995c; Meichenbaum, 1995; Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000a) have, in spite of their contributions to cognition's rise in psychology, expressed reservations about the direction that the cognitive turn has taken and the influence of the computational metaphor. Constructivism itself is reckoned by some a further stage of the cognitive revolution (Mahoney, 1995a). Moreover, the apologists for the cognitive, cognitive-behavioural and allied therapies increasingly acknowledge their constructivist bases (Ellis, 1995; Hollon & Beck, 1994; Meichenbaum, 1995). Their works appear in collections with explicitly constructivist therapies (Dobson, 1988; Freeman, Simon, Beutler, & Arkowitz, 1989; Mahoney, 1995b; Perris, Blackburn, & Perris, 1988) where it is

stressed that the "focus of cognitive psychotherapy is on the development of dysfunctional meaning structures" (Perris, 1988, p. 12).

This constructivist picture of the place of meaning in psychology, the often concomitant critique of computational, information-processing psychology, and the attacks on empirical science and realism are restricted neither to a narrow band of therapists, nor to psychotherapy. One of the best known and most widely cited expositions of the meaning-making position is Bruner's (1990). He comments that the real aim of the cognitive revolution "was to discover . . . the meanings that human beings created out of their encounters with the world . . . and what meaning-making processes were implicated" (p. 2). He disparages the shift from "meaning" to "information," from the *construction* of meaning to the *processing* of information (p.4) that has diverted the human sciences into marginal issues (p. 1). Similar views are now so widespread in psychology—well beyond the psychotherapeutic domains referred to above, for example in educational (Durrheim, 1997; Glassman, 1996; Novak, 1993), developmental (Becvar, 2000; D'Andrea, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 1999; McCarthy, 1994), psychoanalytic (Loewus, 1998; Soldz, 1996), clinical-cultural (Castillo, 1997, 1998; Schwartz, White, & Lutz, 1992) and social psychology (Gergen, 1994)—that they have become a virtual orthodoxy among the metatheoretically minded. Conceptually related to the critique of epistemic foundationalism by Rorty (1998), which is widely cited in the constructivist literature, and to the deconstructionism of Derrida (Derrida & Kamuf, 1991) and others, they make up a large proportion of the pages of psychology's specialist theoretical journals and metatheoretical contributions to subdisciplinary journals. By contrast, in the psychotherapeutic literature there is little systematic critique of constructivist, postmodern epistemology (but for some exceptions see Erwin, 1997; Held, 1995a, 1995b; Mackay, 1994, 1997; Zuriff, 1998).

For much of psychology's history the study of meaning has been excluded from the empirical mainstream and embraced only by

various dissenting psychologies, and a return of meaning to central place in psychology is welcome. However, the reason for the earlier exclusion and, ironically, the current embrace seems to be much the same: the persistent idea that meaning, like the closely related concept of the symbol (Petocz, 1999), is inherently unamenable to objective, scientific investigation. The concept of meaning is set about with confusion, even mystique, that interferes with its clear analysis and systematic explanation, but appeals to those suspicious of orthodox empirical science and its supposed assumption of "transcendent superiority" (McNamee & Gergen, 1992a, p. 5). The recent explosion of interest in meaning has done little to dispel this view of meaning or clarify its place in psychology. I want to argue here that there are at least two major senses of meaning that are confused in the literature, and that this confusion drags into it a number of other muddled theses: that objective reality is unknowable, and so is not available to anchor meanings; and that such reality as is knowable and meaningful is then constructed by persons or their discourse to yield many realities. However, neither giving meaning a proper place in psychology, nor good psychology, nor yet compassionate therapy depends on the epistemology and ontology of anti-realist postmodernism. The positions, often simultaneously held, that reality is unknowable, indeterminate, is constructed by persons, and that there are many realities are incoherent and self-defeating.

4. From Meaning to Meaning-Making

The core argument in the literature on meaning-making moves from certain psychological facts and insights to epistemological and related ontological theses. The insights are of three kinds:

1. Meaning and the myriad ways people struggle to make sense of or, in the narrative psychologies, tell a coherent story about oneself, relationships, illness and experiences are of central importance to psychology.

2. Observation shows that the same events and objects may differ greatly in meaning across individuals, times and cultures. Meaning is thus not an inherent part of objects of the world. (Importantly, these first two together are taken to carry a moral point: they demand a recognition and explanation of individual and cultural variation, and oppose both the imposition of psychotherapists' values and therapy conceptualized as a "behavioral health delivery system" [Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000b, p. 7]).

3. Since meaning is not given in the objects of the world, it is only when persons interact with objects that meaning arises. This is nicely put in a saying of Epictetus used by Ellis (Dryden & Ellis, 1988, p. 124) as a slogan of rational-emotive therapy: "Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things." Another way of expressing this is that events and things possess no *property* 'meaning': they are not meaningful in their nature.

So far, so good. However, a series of spurious inferences are generally drawn from these insights:

1. Meaning, not being a part of objective things or events, must then be autonomously (*ex nihilo*?) created by the person, or, in social constructionism, in the discursive practices of persons.

2. This creation of meaning is part of the literal construction of reality (or realities, as many in the literature like to say) by persons, perhaps in discourse, inter- or intra-personally, or in the telling of the narrative.

3. The result then is a constructed or subjective reality whose constructed objects *do* possess meaning; that is, are meaningful in nature.

These several inferences are assimilated to a larger antirealist philosophy that is argued to explain the insights and justify the im-

portance of meaning in psychology. Some might object to the 'antirealist' description, perhaps preferring 'postmodern'. Nonetheless, the thesis of the meaning-makers undermines the idea of truth, denies the possibility of objective knowledge and implies that reality is dependent on minds. This, as I will return to argue later, is antirealist in both epistemology and ontology.

5. Meaning without Constructivist antirealism

This set of false but influential inferences may be countered by an examination of the concept of meaning to show that meaning is part of the objective, determinate world and thus in principle open to systematic examination. Moreover, support for the genuine insights in the critique of traditional psychotherapy requires no recourse to the postmodern antirealism of constructivism, but requires a realist account of knowledge, truth and objectivity.

5.1 *Two Senses of Meaning*

Notwithstanding the genuine complexities in semantic theory, we may, following Petocz (2001), distinguish two senses of the term meaning, *linguistic/symbolic* and *experiential*. These are not two subcategories of a same kind, distinguishing between which is academic pedantry, but distinct, albeit related phenomena. *Linguistic/symbolic* meaning is where words, signs, acts, marks and tokens of various kinds have meaning in that they stand for or refer to something else. The symbolization may be formal, informal, idiosyncratic, conscious or unconscious. It includes as a subset the conventional symbols of language and other representational systems. When used in propositions that make reference to states of affairs, these tokens become part of truth claims, claims about what is the case, about reality. Truth and reality are, as I will argue below, concepts distorted in the meaning-making literature. A part of this seems to occur because they are inappropriately transferred from the context of linguistic (specifically propositional) to that of experiential

meaning, to suggest incorrectly that to ascribe meaning is to create personal or socially constituted truths and realities.

Experiential meaning is meaning as *motivational salience*, that where some object, event, process, thought, perception, and so forth, has particular salience to a person, a special place in the person's system of interests— established, it is important to note, via the person's beliefs about those objects. An event or object does not have experiential meaning merely because it stands for something else. (Confusingly, though, because almost everything humans do is mediated symbolically, the event or object is likely also to be a token, such as a word, with linguistic/symbolic meaning that does indeed happen to stand for something else.) Rather it has meaning in that it (or what it stands for by virtue of its separate, symbolic meaning) plays some special part in the person's motivational economy. It is because a person has hopes of, fears, loves, loathes or desires something that that something or its symbol has experiential meaning for that person. We can be quite neutral about the nature of the motives involved, and need not subscribe to any particular theory of the primary motives (the need to make sense, to maintain the self, to have coherent cognitive sets, a non-teleological drive system, etc.) to make this point. Nor does it matter if motives are the product of social interaction, shaped by discourse. It does not matter to the logic of meaning where the motives come from, how many and what kind they are; the meaningfulness of events is their motivational salience. The events most likely to have meaning (salience) for a person are those most likely to be instrumental in affecting important motives. One might expect, say, the behaviour of parents to be more meaningful for most persons than, say, the curvature of the far side of the moon. (Again, confusingly, the objects most likely to be given linguistic/symbolic representation are also those that are important to our major motives.)

To make this clearer it needs to be noted—and this is something that recent psychotherapies fail to grasp (Mackay, 1994)—that cog-

nitions (beliefs, constructions, schemas, etc.) and motives (desires, wants, needs, wishes, etc.) always operate together: beliefs without related desires lead to nothing; desires without related beliefs imply no action. A complete intentional or 'folk psychological' explanation uses both the intentional categories of reason, belief (cognition) and motivation (conation), to explain some action. Some advocates of meaning psychology (Bruner, 1990) do refer to intentional explanation positively, as though it were part of their programme to rehabilitate it. However, they provide clear analysis neither of the nature of intentionality nor of its implications for psychology.

An object, event or experience, then, has meaning (salience) for persons both because of their motives and because of their related beliefs. It only has relevance to the person's motives via beliefs about the relation of the object to the motive. From cognitive therapy comes a typical example of a pathogenic belief, "unless I am loved, I am nothing" (Beck & Weishaar, 1989, p. 28), that precipitates problems when a client's relationship breaks up. What is not said by Beck and Weishaar, or, it seems, anywhere in the vast literature on cognitive and constructive therapies, is that this type of explanation depends for its coherence on the additional fact that the client has a motive, albeit here the vague wish to be 'other than nothing'. The relationship break-up has depressogenic meaning just because it is related by the belief to the motive. In the absence of the motive the cognition would mean nothing, and the client would not act. This depressogenic meaning is meaning as salience, not linguistic meaning. Almost all the examples that therapists (not only the cognitive ones mentioned above) give of the meaningfulness of events for a person illustrate cases of meaning as motivational salience, not linguistic meaning. This is true both of the distress-inducing meanings of events and the psychotherapeutic reconstruction of their meaning—although with the contemporary focus on cognition and construction rather than motive, the nature of the motives concerned is rarely made explicit.

However, the implied reduction of all motivation to the single need to make sense, or the "quest for coherence" (Arciero & Guidano, 2000), a move much favoured in the literature on meaning-making in psychology, is problematic. It is an irony that so many of the theorists concerned with motivational meaning and hostile to reductionism should ignore the variety and classification of motives, and how they might relate to evolutionary demands, effectively reducing all motives to that of the need to make sense. Even the most casual examination of the impulse to make sense of events must surely prompt the question: why do humans want to make sense of things? And from this it follows that the process is *for* something that presumably has an evolutionary function. The neglect of motivational theory in the wake of the cognitive turn is a major gap in psychology (Mackay, 1997).

The argument that meaning is created by persons is in part true. Something may be meaningful for me (or my kind) but not for someone else. It is also true that it is by virtue of things being meaningful to me that my experience and behaviour are affected and effected. These insights are of enormous importance for the conduct of psychology and psychotherapy. Yet there is no legitimate inference from this to the idea that meaning is somehow autonomously created, and certainly not to the idea that reality is created. The very assertion that it is the *same thing* that is meaningful for me (us) but not meaningful for someone else is itself an affirmation of, and dependent for its sense on, the commonsense realist principle that things and events exist independently of the mind that is apprehending. The importance of the insights is that meaning may be individual—a point noted by Held (1995a)—or peculiar to a group. Grasping that meaning is motivational salience makes sense of this. That is, the particular circumstances that make an event meaningful to me (us) may not be present when another (another cultural group) encounters the same event. I (we) have a different history, a different genetic make-up, and, most importantly, the motives with which events engage are different in me (us) than in others. Motiva-

tional structure at any one time, that is, the compound set of interacting motives that are operative in a human, is the result of an intricate learning history. This is the history of causal interaction between an evolved primate in all its physical, mental and social complexity and the environment in which it acts. It is necessarily a determinate history.

Determinism is apparently considered to be so obsolete—part of a defunct logical empiricism (Neimeyer, 1995a)—that no one in the meaning-making literature bothers to mount a proper argument against it. It is never explained how the appeal to case data made by constructivist psychotherapists could make sense without it. It is not explained how information learned from one situation could be applied to any other (which is presumably the purpose of reporting data and examples) without the determinist assumption that like causes have like consequences. It is not explained how autonomously created one-of-a-kind entities could feature in the regularities that psychology requires for general knowledge, without making them in fact incomprehensibly irregular. Nor, on the other hand, is it explained how psychology could possibly do without general information.

The analysis of meaning sketched above is realist and yet compatible with both the fact that events do not have meaning on their own, and the fact that meaning may be individual in character. Because meaning is a *relation* between persons (specifically motives) and the objects, events, words, experiences, said to 'have meaning' for the person, it is neither part of the apprehended object—a point rightly emphasized by cognitive and constructive therapists—but nor is it part of the apprehending object (the person)—a point apparently not understood by them. Treating meaning as a relation is not part of any anti-objective metatheory. Relations exist as surely as anything else does. They are objective and studiable. Cognitive and constructive psychotherapists are correct in pointing out that it is not the events and objects in themselves that possess meaning, or

depress persons, but how persons construe those events. However, it is a mistake, encouraged by the role of mental nouns in our commonsense language (having a belief, a construct, etc.), to then conclude that the meaning must exist in, be a part of, the belief or construal of the (meaningful) object. Moreover, this leads to a further problematic move: that of supposing that there is a realm of 'constructed realities' where, unlike objective reality, there exist things that are meaningful in their very nature. The constitutive feature of the proposed constructed, personal or social realities is just that they are meaningful. Yet there is no need to invent a special ontology for constructed realities where, unlike objective reality, meaning is a property of (constructed) things. 'How persons construe the event' indicates not an inherently meaningful, constructed, mental object, but the two terms of a relation subtended by persons (specifically motives) to a real object.

Underlying the problem is a misunderstanding of the logic of situations. This mistake is to allow that things may have their relations intrinsic to them—as constructed objects would have to have if they were meaningful in nature (Anderson, 1962b; Maze, 1983). The definition of an object or event, what makes it a particular thing, is independent of the relations into which it enters; either that, or it cannot enter into a relation because the relation is already (impossibly) within it. An intrinsically meaningful entity, such as a constructed object is supposed to be, could not indeed be meaningful to me or meaningful to someone else because these are clearly relations, and the relation of significance (here meaning) is already within it. For any relation to hold, it must be between distinct, existent entities. The entities must have intrinsic properties and not be defined in terms of their relations to one another (as constructivists suppose constructed, meaningful objects to be), or either there would be nothing between which the relation could obtain or no relation so to obtain.

This account of knowledge as a relation should not be confused with the social constructionist account of knowledge as relational. Discourse requires one to distinguish between relations and the entities that enter into relations, so social constructionists do sometimes talk as though there are people involved in "interchanges among people" that then produce "the terms in which the world is understood" (Gergen, 1985, p. 5). However, social constructionism also holds that relations constitute knowledge, mind, persons and, indeed, everything—given that reality itself is constructed. Rather than holding that there are entities that enter into relations, one of which is that between persons and facts, and which we call knowledge, constructionism holds that persons, facts and much else that might be considered entities are somehow relational in themselves. In doing so it commits itself to the possibility of constitutive relations in which it is supposed that things may be relational in their nature, yielding a world of relations mysteriously without the entities to enter into relations.

Returning to the processes involved in the meaning relation: certain items happen to effect changes in a person's motivational structure. Chocolate to hunger is a relatively simple example, if somewhat removed from psychotherapy. Because of the way humans have evolved, eating chocolate effects changes in hunger levels (e.g. by altering blood sugar), gives taste and social experiences, and so on. Knowledge, or rather belief (because error is always possible), about what the item means (it is food, tastes good, makes one feel satiated, is deemed a reward by parents, etc.) follows from these events. Of course motives are complex and develop and change over time, perhaps coming into conflict with one another. (Motivational conflict is the basis of psychodynamic conceptions of disorder.) Chocolate and its associations may mean both assuaging of hunger and a guilt-inducing breach of diet, confirming a view of oneself as weak and bad. Chocolate and its symbolic representations come to have a meaning that, say, a block of wood does not, just because of their motivational effects. The general point is that the meaning of

something is the relation of that something to the person's motivational structure via belief. This relation is in turn a consequence of the past impact of that kind of thing on the person's motivational states. These motivational states may be 'socially constructed' in a commonsense use of the phrase, in that social factors, institutional and familial demands and sanctions, and even the assumptions in our language are involved in the production of motives.

Further, this is an objective, determinate process, open in principle to scientific examination. The meanings of events are, variously, individual, shared within groups and universal. However difficult they may be to trace, their causes are in principle specifiable. Meanings are not the autonomous creation of persons. If the latter were true, their arbitrariness and unpredictability would make nonsense of all systematic psychological investigation. Nothing learned from any one case would apply to any other; the autonomous creation of an event or object would render it *sui generis*. Understanding that meaning as salience is an objective, determinate relation returns it to scientific examination. However difficult its study might be, and however poorly prepared contemporary psychology is for it, there is no conceptual bar to the systematic, scientific investigation of meaning (see also Petocz, 1999).

5.2 *From Confusion about Meaning to the Undermining of Truth*

There are several links between the constructivist treatment of meaning and the postmodern subversion of the idea of truth. One appears to be abetted by the confusion between linguistic meaning and meaning as salience. Linguistically meaningful sentences generally have some descriptive function or reference, and may be true or false, or, if complex, partly true and partly false. The notion of truth is bound up with that of the proposition to which linguistic/symbolic meaning is fundamental. However, something that is meaningful in the sense of salient is not subject to truth conditions, at least not by virtue of its meaningfulness. The meaning of something for me necessarily depends on my beliefs about it, but not on

the truth of those beliefs. The psychotherapy casebook is replete with examples where the meaningfulness of untrue beliefs brings about distress. The affordable act of spending a few hundred dollars on clothes precipitates a bout of anxiety and depression in someone. Anticipating a visit to the formal and middle-aged bank manager brings on a panic attack in a well-off young professional. The events (spending money, encountering the manager) have significant meanings for the clients, but they are neither true nor false. The contents of the beliefs that constitute the pathogenic meanings 'spending on myself confirms that I am a selfish and unworthy person' or 'bank managers are figures in authority and will harm me' are propositional and may be true or false. But their truth or otherwise is irrelevant to their meaningfulness. Beliefs, how we construe the world, may profoundly affect behaviour (presumably through links with even deeper beliefs and motives such as childhood fears of parental disapproval) without being true. So, although it is true that spending is meaningful for me (because I believe it confirms me as selfish and unworthy), objectively, my belief may not be true: the act itself is not necessarily unworthy. This is so however important the act's meaning to me may be for understanding my behaviour, my motives, and so on, and however relevant it is to psychological investigation.

The problem is not solved, nor are the conceptual difficulties of antirealism avoided, by arguing that a belief such as 'spending on myself confirms that I am a selfish and unworthy person' is one of various possible realities and is 'true for me' just because it is meaningful. It may be a useful shorthand to say that something is 'true for me, but not true for others', and it may be a striking metaphor to convey the importance of beliefs for our psychology. Moreover, the therapist's recognition of the distressing importance of this to the client may also be valuable. But to suggest that this is literally a personal or socially constructed *truth* is simply false, and to suggest that there are many realities (Gergen & McNamee, 2000, p. 347; Mahoney, 2000, p. 52; Raskin & Lewandowski, 2000), truths for me or

my kind, but not for others, is equally false. Inventing alternative epistemologies and ontologies, and special theories of truth, to deal with this is to move from insight to nonsense.

6. Constructivist Philosophy, Criticism and Contradictions

Naturally constructivists defend their position against the sort of criticism made here. They do this is several ways. One is by making claims about the constructivist position, particularly on language, to bolster the view that knowledge and reality (their own and their critics') are indeed constructed. A second is by making claims about their critics' positions to show that their critics' position depends on mistaken principles. In this case we are concerned with realism, although, as I will illustrate, they often confuse realism with both positivism and scientific orthodoxy, and so miss the target. However, there is an extra twist to the constructivist defence: constructivism not only offers positive accounts of important psychological concepts but, because it reinterprets the role of language by diminishing or abolishing its referential function and, relatedly, treats logic and argument as contextually dependent linguistic practices (or *language games*), it undermines opposition by attacking the very reasoning on which argument depends. It is, for example, common to reject critics' views because they rest on concepts of truth, reason, reality and objectivity deemed *outmoded*, or are supposedly committed to an *absolutist* view of truth. And, thirdly, there can be a strong moral tone in the constructivist defence. Just as they claim their epistemological and ontological pluralism implies and generates a tolerance of others' views in therapy and elsewhere, so anyone arguing for the possibility of objective knowledge may be tarred intolerant and absolutist. This results in a mix of (a) claims about the nature of constructivist discourse and (b) rebuttals of accusations.

The critiques by constructivists of the presumed position of their critics, their attacks on reasoning and logic, and their attribution of

hubris to realists are nicely illustrated in the two responses (McNamee, 2003; Raskin & Neimeyer, 2003) to the original version of this paper (Mackay, 2003a). I deal with these matters here, not because I want to show that constructivists are a dastardly lot and would stop at nothing to blacken critics, but because these several ways of attacking rational evaluation of constructivism are engendered by theses central to its philosophy. This is ultimately fatal not just for rational discourse, but to any and every argument that constructivists wish to offer of psychological concepts.

7. Constructivists on Language and Reference

7.1 *We Make No Assertions, We Only Offer an Alternative Discourse: The Possibility of Language and Truth without Reference*

Arguments that I have been making in this paper depend wholly on the fact of reference: that language refers to situations; makes claims that various states affairs obtain, while others do not; and that though one inference is valid, some other is not. A position on language is central to constructivist views. Constructivists generally identify themselves as part of the 'linguistic turn', and deny or diminish the referential nature of language, instead stressing that "language... is an engaged activity, not a tool we use to talk about the world while remaining unrelated to it" (McNamee, 2003 p. 388). This assertion (for that is what it is) that constructionists are asserting nothing, merely exploring the possibilities of alternative discourses in a spirit of unprejudiced investigation where "diversity and deviation are honored" (Gergen, 2001, p. 420), is commonly presented as a rebuttal of the accusation of antirealism (Neimeyer, 1995c, pp. 341–342). It enables them to dismiss critics who argue against constructivist assertions by denying that they asserted or claimed anything. Thus when I argued (Mackay, 2003) that, say, a constructivist claim is factually wrong, or ends in contradiction, Raskin and Neimeyer and McNamee treat this as failing to grasp the functions of constructivist discourse, mistaking the "engaged, embodied discourse (performance) of persons in relation" (McNamee,

p. 394) for constructivist claims about the nature of some state of affairs. The assumption is that discourse is possible without, and incompatible with, reference. Yet their actual discursive practices are, as they must be to say anything, in direct contradiction to this: they "address Mackay's argument" (McNamee, p. 388), set out "liberating social charters" and stake "an identity claim" (Raskin & Neimeyer, p. 400). No one can do this without talking about states of affairs, real and supposed. Nor could anyone understand what they meant were they not referring to things. Reference is a condition of discourse.

In case it is supposed that these views are only part of a naive and unsophisticated constructivism or constructionism or peculiar to the responses mentioned, consider Gergen, perhaps the most influential of the social constructionists, who is regularly cited in the meaning-making literature. He makes many of same flawed arguments using the same polemical devices. Among several of his works on psychotherapy theory (e.g. Gergen, 1996; McNamee & Gergen, 1992b) is an article co-authored with McNamee (Gergen & McNamee, 2000) in the Neimeyer-Raskin collection (2000a) in which they present a critique of the discourse of disorder and its dehumanizing values, and raise the "central concern of constructionists . . . the processes by which human communities generate meaning" (p. 334). But underlying this are their theses on language, reference and truth. They tell us about the "challenges to the established truths and values" of groups (p. 335). They present different discourses (physics, literary theory, mental disorder) as different "games" (p. 334), without acknowledgement that this would make the transformative discourse of their own presentation incoherently both part of a particular game and outside all games in its reference to the particular games. And soon they are writing of "alternative realities" (p. 336) afforded by reconceptualizing disorder. In short, they justify their sometimes insightful critique of traditional mental health approaches, and the importance of meaning, with an

antirealist attack on the referential function of language, and on the accompanying idea of truth.

As he must, Gergen uses language normally enough to talk of reality, to make claims, deny attributions, and tell a critic that he "simply gets it wrong" (1999, p. 113). Yet in a typical, vigorously asserted rejection of his critics' accusation that he undermines the ideas of reality, reference and empirical truth, and in the very process of showing that he does not, and is not a relativist, Gergen (2001) tells us that he is "not trying to 'get it right' about the nature of science, reality, the mind, truth, objectivity, and so on... [His] chief aims are transformative" (p. 419)—as if those two are incompatible. And even while denying that he undermines the notion of truth, Gergen says that truth is "truth within traditions" (p. 422), writes of the "production of empirical truth within communities" (p. 421), and claims that "the very concepts of truth and falsity as traditionally conceived are themselves so flawed as to be irrelevant" (p. 429), and that "social conventionalism . . . inhabits the very process of verification/falsification" (p. 421). Like the psychotherapeutic meaning-making constructivists treated above, he repeatedly puts terms and phrases that smack of objectivism and realism, such as "get it right" (p. 419), "what really exists", "really there" and "independent of language" (p. 425), in scare quotes, or uses other devices to undermine them and distract argument from the issue, derisively referring, for example, to the "rage for the real" (p. 423)—this in spite of his earlier (Gergen, 1998) appeal for a non-adversarial form of discussion of these issues! But he seems oblivious of the fact that in the very act of criticizing Maze (2001) and others (about the necessity of factual assertion to discourse), he is repeating the error that Maze points to, asserting the fact that he is not asserting fact (Gergen, 2001, p. 429). Wriggle as he may, Gergen cannot get off the hook of the ordinary realism of assertion: the codas he appends to his statements on truth—truth is "within traditions" (p. 422) or produced "within communities" (p. 421)—in order both to justify his claims that he retains a concept of truth and yet to claim that truth

is socially conditioned are themselves assertions about states of affairs in just the sense that Maze and others are trying to make clear, they are assertions (of the putative fact) that truth is socially constituted. These codas are themselves unqualified claims to truth of exactly the kind that Gergen says must be qualified. Should he, in a vain attempt to step outside the inconsistency of this self-referentiality, wish to say that the claim in the codas, that truth is always 'within traditions', is itself 'within traditions', he would set off on a futile and infinite regress.

7.2 *We Are Not 'Anti Realist,' It Is Just That There Are Many Realities, and Yours Is Just One of Them: Truth as Relative to Discourse*

One means of neutralising criticism is to argue that, far from being antirealist there are in fact 'many realities.' This might seem to preserve some sort of realism and ward off the attack that constructivism degenerates into an impossible relativism. However, this generates the classic contradiction of ontological dualism (see Hibberd, 2001), a dualism that McNamee and Raskin and Neimeyer claim to have overcome, though their work suffers from its standard problems: even to talk about two modes of reality or discourse is to situate oneself in a third, and set off on a vicious infinite regress. The metatheoretical discourse in which a critic like Mackay is told that there are many and equally valid discourses is, they disingenuously argue, itself merely one discourse among many, just "a way of understanding the world" adopted on a "pragmatic basis" (Raskin & Neimeyer, 2003, p. 398). Note, however, McNamee never says what constitutes 'understanding' versus misunderstanding, nor what might make some procedures 'useful ways of going on together' and others not, nor do Raskin and Neimeyer tell how to decide between 'competing realities' (in what does competition consist given these are literally incommensurate?), nor yet from within what discourse we would be "languaging" (McNamee) when we made such decisions. Whenever someone talks of many realities we may ask: what reality is the proposition 'there are many realities' itself about?

Clearly, if it is true, then it is true about reality. Whichever reality that is, it cannot be among the number of realities to which the sentence refers. Thus, if true, this means there are many realities plus one. Then, of course, we may ask of the assertion 'there are many realities plus one', 'to what reality does this refer?', compounding the realities indefinitely. A coherent ontology merely claims that there is one order of the real, to which this claim itself and all others putatively refer. The attack on the idea of absolute or "timeless truths" (Neimeyer, 1995b, p. 12) or depiction of the realists as attempting to "compel universal assent to any one truth" (Raskin & Neimeyer, p. 400) is an appeal to the liberal mind offended by the arrogance of apparent claims to certainty. It is little better than an *argumentum ad populum*, and it makes the double mistake in implying that realism both claims an absolute reality, and certain knowledge.

Many constructivists might object to a bald description of their position as antirealist, perhaps preferring postmodern (Mahoney, 1995a; Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000b). Many, like Mahoney, affirm a realism of sorts (Mahoney, 1988, p. 3, 2000, p. 51), yet deny its principles and implications by asserting that "psychological realities are inherently private" (Mahoney, 1995a, p. 9), and literally "we manufacture realities' (Mahoney, 2000. p. 52). The meaning-making literature also undermines realism through parody and misunderstanding that prevent any careful examination of realism's theses. The literature misleadingly identifies objectivism with positivism (Bruner, 1990, p. 108; Mahoney, 2000, p. 51); and equates representationalist with realist theories of knowledge (Arciero & Guidano, 2000, p. 93; Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996a; Neimeyer, 1995a, p. 168, 1995b, p. 14; McNamee, 2003, p. 388). Words such as real (Mahoney, 1988, p. 3), reality (Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000b, p. 5), facts (Neimeyer, 1995a, p. 165) or objective (Mahoney, 1995a, p. 197) are discredited by being put in scare quotes. In places, however, the meaning-making literature reveals its anti-objectivism quite explicitly. Efran and Clarfield (1992), intending to defend constructionist therapy against

the criticism that it is an "anything goes" approach, say that "'truth' is a set of opinions widely shared", concurring with the quotation: "What is true is what I can't help believing" (p. 201). Neimeyer (1995a, p. 165), in a pragmatist attempt to avoid commitment to factuality and reference, shrinks from the idea of "truth" in favour of "consequences', and replaces "facts" with "interpretations" to make consensus the criterion of knowledge (p. 168). In this philosophy, truth is contextual, and contexts are a matter of choice: "Knowledge is 'right' or 'wrong' in the light of the perspective we have chosen to assume" (Bruner, 1990. p. 25). The same author talks of being "freed from the shackles of ontological realism" as the basis for a promising psychology (Bruner, 1990, p. 101). And there are disingenuous claims that reality is indeed relative (Dowd & Pace, 1989).

7.3 *We Privilege No Discourse: You Privilege Realist Discourse. We Are Immune from the Charge of Infinite Regress*

Constructivism rejects "privileging one form of discourse over another" (McNamee, 2003, p. 389), that is, nothing said in one discourse (which can have meaning and truth only internal to itself) could be true across the range of incommensurable discourses. In direct contradiction to this non-privileging pluralism, constructionist/ivists in practice forever claim privilege for the position they advocate in preference to others, pluralism. Any comment that the constructionist/ivist makes about the metatheoretical discourse is itself necessarily outside some metatheoretical discourse. It is a meta-metatheoretical discourse, if you like. Yet, no matter how often the critic points out that the ultimate comment about discourse or pluralism is of a meta-order to, outside of, the other discourses of which it speaks, and paradoxically is still referential, the constructivist retorts that that (and, *tu quoque*, anything you say, critic) is also from some (other) 'assumptive framework'. In contempt of the canons of argument and evidence, they neither accept that they are in a regress that destroys their argument, nor offer a proper solution to it. They magic it away and, unconcerned by regress or con-

tradiction, carry on as usual. Raskin and Neimeyer even claim as a virtue the "candor with which [constructivists] acknowledge . . . assumptive frameworks" (2003, p. 398).

7.4 *Debate, Rationality and Logic Are Contextual*

Both McNamee (2003), and Raskin & Neimeyer (2003) illustrate nicely my early comment that evidence, logic, rational argument brought in opposition to constructivism may be dismissed on constructivist principles. They relativize logic (McNamee questions which or whose logic or rationality), ignore contradiction (McNamee's title is "bridging incommensurate discourses") and the mode of debate that depends on dealing with contradiction, and hold: we assert nothing; we do not say you are wrong, and we are immune "to the critique of contradiction" (McNamee). Debate, proof, refutation, assertion and even rationality and logic are dismissed as an optional discourse we choose not to enter. Constructionists merely propose "useful ways of going on together" (McNamee). The charge of incoherence is to be rebutted not by showing that it is false but by rejecting the very idea that "we should "forbid" any theoretical position" (Raskin & Neimeyer, p. 407). Of course, this is contradicted in practice. McNamee, for example does dispute arguments: she says in normal declarative, referential language that reference is not central to language, and that she can "fully dispose of Mackay's critique" (p. 390). She starts a chain of argument with "In fact . . . " and concludes it by denying the relevance of factuality, of "which side" has "the facts straight" (p. 389). She argues "contrary to Mackay's claim" (p. 391); she agrees; she disagrees; she asserts; she debates. The contrast is even more striking between Raskin and Neimeyer's forbearing claim that constructivism is just one "way of understanding the world" forbidding no position, on the one hand, and their practice, on the other. They "correct Mackay's caricature" (p. 398), show how Mackay's charges of " 'incoherence' . . . lose their force" (p. 400), deny "con-

structivism is . . . hostile to scientific discourse" (Abstract), and much more.

Could anyone reading these constructivist papers sincerely believe that they are not disagreeing with, asserting contraries to and rejecting my arguments, but merely exploring equal but different ways of understanding? Are we really to believe that when she says "Mackay's critique of contradiction does not stand" (p. 391), McNamee is claiming nothing? Does what they say reside, immune from contradiction, in a discourse where truth is only intra-discourse stipulation? Of course not: It is a statement given in ordinary referential discourse about what McNamee takes to be the case, a direct assertion that Mackay's critique is false. McNamee and Raskin and Neimeyer are not exempt from the criteria of rational discourse. They cannot coherently claim to not claim anything. Their many contradictions are just that, contradictions.

8. Constructivist Mischaracterisations of Realism:

8.1 *Realists Claim to Know an Absolute, Transcendent Reality or Truth*

A common criticism of realism is that realists claim to know an absolute, transcendent reality or truth. However, a cogent realism, precisely because it is not a relativism, does not hold that things may be relatively, more or less, real (Anderson, 1962a). There is no absolute versus inferior reality. All the real is of the same order, that indicated by the copula 'is'. The 'is' in 'the cat is on the mat' is no more and no less a claim about real states of affairs than it is in 'the end of the world is nigh', or "Personal identity is constructed in the mutual relation between lived experience and the ongoing composition of one's life story" (Arciero & Guidano, 2000, p. 94). The differences between these three assertions are that the second is false (I hope), it mis-takes reality, and the third requires further elucidation of its terms to know exactly what it is asserting. Yet they are all claims that something is the case, about reality. The idea of absolute

versus relative or inferior reality is associated rather with idealism, many of whose confused theses, such as the dependence of the real on mind, reappear in postmodernism and constructivism.

8.2 *Realism Holds That Scientific Knowledge Is Indubitable*

Some of the difficulty that antirealists have with realism is the incorrect assumption that realism implies that scientific knowledge is indubitable, without the possibility of error, leading to the jibe that it is an "authoritarian" epistemology (Mahoney, 1995a, p. 197). For Raskin and Neimeyer (2003) realism becomes the "the naive realist notion that science directly traces reality" (p. 405). Various constructivisms are excessive reactions to the realization of the possibility of error in perception or belief. These include the psychotherapeutic constructivisms under examination here and even the constructivism of experimental cognitivism (percepts are representations constructed from degraded sensory data). The detailed defence of realism's capacity to deal with error is beyond the scope of the present paper (see, however, Galloway, 2000; Michell, 1988; Rantzen, 1993). Nonetheless, the logical point may be made that the possibility of error depends on the possibility of truth. No view that explicitly or implicitly denies the concept of truth, as constructivist antirealism does, genuinely provides for the possibility of error; it merely means that there is neither truth nor error. Indeed constructivism is compatible with the possibility of error only in the sense that it is so hopelessly incoherent that it forbids no position.

8.3 *Realism Is Foundationalist*

Another criticism levelled at realism is that of being foundationalist. Foundationalism, like essentialism (discussed below), is both a complex concept and a handy term of abuse. It is linked to at least two major ideas: (a) a distinction between things-as-experienced and the unknowable things-as-they-are (a distinction held by many personal constructivists, though not social constructionists); and (b) in philosophies of science such as positivism, a distinction between

what is surely, directly, foundationally apprehended (perhaps even by convention and consensus), for example operations, sense data, sensations and other phenomena, and knowledge that is constructed from these.

Critiques of the orthodox philosophies of science have made much use of the foundationalist charge. Raskin and Neimeyer apply this to the realist position on meaning that I developed saying that I see my "philosophical bases as foundational absolutes" (2003, p. 397). However, realism opposes the relativism in this foundationalism holding that all knowledge is of the same order.

My rejection of these as misunderstandings is not idiosyncratic. Hibberd (2002) says realism and "social constructionism as an epistemology" both[2]:

1. accept the Heraclitean doctrine that things are constantly changing;

2. recognize the reality of relations and an interactionist ontology;

3. reject the thesis of essentialism;

4. hold the view that there are no such things as pure universals;

5. reject any epistemology which involves mediated cognition;

6. reject any theory of language which has statements or propositions as linguistic entities that are true if they correspond to reality;

[2] Note that social constructionism and personal constructivism differ on at least (5) and (7), and I agree with some of McNamee's differentiations. For example, social constructionists do not accept the idea of the individual autonomous creation of meaning, or that meaning is 'inside the heads of autonomous individuals'.

7. reject any theory of meaning which makes meaning a constituent of the mind;

8. recognize the importance of context to social life;

9. hold the view that there is no such thing as an individual untouched by social processes;

10. reject the view that scientific inquiry can be free from the motive of social interests.

There is no ontological distinction between any foundational facts and a superstructure built upon them. Curiously, it is Raskin and Neimeyer who revert to the dualism of "built" theoretical systems versus foundational "theoretical assumptions' required, they tell us, in "every system for making sense of things' (Raskin & Neimeyer, 2003, p. 398).

8.4 *Realism Offers a Disembodied Account of Meaning*

In her critique of my paper, McNamee (2003) provides the clue to repeated misconstructions of realist views: "Mackay offers a *familiar* critique" (p. 387, emphasis added). Almost line by line the two responses (McNamee, 2003; Raskin & Neimeyer, 2003) debate and attack a 'familiar' realism of their own construction (something like the mixture of positivism and cognitive representationalism found in psychology textbooks) that realists do not support. Indeed, realist colleagues are exasperated not so much by criticisms but by the uncomprehending depiction of realism. As one reading these responses brutally said: "They just don't get it." McNamee contrasts two positions: (a) that of Rorty, constructionists and others of the linguistic turn whose focus "can be considered social in that language... is primarily an engaged activity" (p. 388) and who hold "there is no possibility of separating observer from the observed" (p. 390); to (b) that of those who treat language as "a tool we use to talk about the world while remaining unrelated to it" (p. 388), "conceptualizing language as a system . . . we use to represent or picture

the world" (p. 389), and maintaining a "Cartesian subject–object distinction" (p. 388). Yet realism holds neither the imputed disembodied view nor the copy theory of language. One should not equate "representationalist [the person's knowledge of the world is mediated by representations or constructs—which most varieties of personal constructivism believe; Mackay, 1994, 1997] with realist theories of knowledge" (Mackay, 2003a, p. 373).

These critics also conflate very different senses of separateness or detachment between the person and the world. There is required for any talk about the 'knower and known' a logical distinction between (a) the one who enters into a particular relation (knowledge) to the object and (b) the object. Maintaining this distinction avoids the muddle of, say, simultaneously asserting a conceptual unity of knower and known (we "can never detach the knower from the known," Raskin & Neimeyer, 2003, p. 406) and a conceptual distinction between them (the "structure of the knower becomes as important as the object known," p. 405). The logical distinction between the two terms of the knowledge relation is neither McNamee's 'unrelated-disembodied' distinction, nor the Cartesian distinction that McNamee incorrectly attributes to realism (2003, p. 388)—realism is explicitly against Cartesian idealism (Anderson, 1962a).

8.5 *Realism Is Essentialist*

Another charge that constructivists direct against opposition is that of being essentialist. In the case of realism it is misdirected. McNamee argues "against universal, essential or representational reality" (2003, p. 392). Raskin and Neimeyer (2003), like other constructivist responses to realist critiques, repeatedly attribute essentialism to me by arguing that realism insists "all inquiry be rooted in . . . essentialism" (p. 398) and that "a realist approach . . . assumes there to be . . . universal essences" (p. 400).The apparently unshakeable conviction that realism must be essentialist leads them to make tendentious additions to opponents' words and concepts – again not uncommon in the constructivist mischaracterisation of realism. De-

terminism is re-presented as "utter mechanistic determinism" (Raskin & Neimeyer, 2003, p. 403) (neither 'mechanism' nor 'mechanistic' occurs in my text). They recast 'intrinsic properties' as "intrinsic essences" (p. 404).

Essentialism[3] is often attributed, as it is by Raskin and Neimeyer, as an all-purpose denunciation, like calling someone a Stalinist at a Trotskyite meeting. In ontology it is a doctrine about what properties do and do not make up the 'essences' of things. It normally implies a distinction (one realism rejects) between essential and non-essential aspects of things, generally draws upon the idea (which realism also rejects) that there are certain universal essences in which particulars partake to be that sort of thing, and involves a dualism of universals and particulars (which realism also rejects). Essentialism is not, contra Raskin and Neimeyer, the same as the logical requirement that "entities must have intrinsic properties and not be defined in terms of their relations to one another" (p. 404).

8.6 *Realists Believe in a Transcendent Reality*

In their critiques McNamee criticizes the idea that "reality . . . underlie[s] appearances" (p. 389) and Raskin and Neimeyer approve of not "attempting to adjudicate whose claims are 'true' or 'false' with reference to some transcendent reality beyond the conversation itself" (p. 400)[4]. Yet the idea of a transcendent reality and its concomitant, contrasting realm, a reality as experienced, is alien to direct realism. It belongs instead to theories of indirect knowledge, such as those Raskin and Neimeyer rightly acknowledge many constructivist colleagues hold (and they endorse themselves, Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000b). It is when one both (a) denies 'antirealism', that is, "believe[s] that the world exists" yet (b) asserts "but . . . people only

[3] See Hibberd (2002) on why *both* realism and social constructionism reject essentialism.
[4] Though they talk of therapeutic practice, it seems meant as a general thesis.

know [it] indirectly through their constructions about it" (Raskin & Neimeyer, p. 405) that one creates an "external reality beyond human perception", in short, a transcendent reality.

8.7 *Realists Are Absolutists*

Raskin and Neimeyer say that "Mackay sees his philosophical bases as foundational absolutes . . . this philosophical absolutism makes it impossible for Mackay to even entertain constructivism" (pp. 397–398). McNamee disparages "closed pronouncements of how things already or really are" (p. 391). We all can and do say how things are. This is not making closed pronouncements of how things really are with "apodictic certainty" (Raskin &Neimeyer's phrase, p. 398). I can only repeat that and why realism does not claim an absolute reality: A cogent realism, precisely because it is not a relativism, does not hold that things may be relatively, more or less, real. There is no 'absolute' versus 'inferior' reality. All the real is of the same order. Antirealists incorrectly assume that realism implies that scientific knowledge is indubitable, while in fact only theories like realism that, unlike constructionism/ivism, allow the possibility of truth can allow the possibility of error.

8.8 *We Are Tolerant: You Are Intolerant*

The defence of constructivism also can degenerate into a kind of moralism, as may be gathered from some of the reported comments above. The latter arise out of an invalid inference: that to hold that truth is possible implies apodictic certainty, absolute knowledge, and so on. This is the other side of the invalid inference from tolerant epistemology to tolerant interpersonal conduct, say in psychotherapy. It is nicely illustrated in the reply (Raskin & Neimeyer, 2003) to the original version of this paper (Mackay, 2003a). They portray not just the realist position but the author as authoritarian, discomfited by a "tolerantly pluralist epistemology" because "it does not compel universal assent to any one truth" (p. 40). They say that the author is unable to "even entertain constructivism", is "of-

fended by the challenge to scientific authority" (p. 405) and he insists "that some theories should be forbidden" because they are "incoherent within his own procrustean conceptual framework" (p. 407). My argument that there is an unexplained inconsistency between dismissing determinism and doing empirical research that makes no sense without determinate, predictable events is transformed to "he insists constructivists are required to refute [determinism] before proceeding" (Raskin & Neimeyer, p. 403). Mackay "simply cannot comprehend" the "evidence and arguments that constructivists offer" (p. 405). And more: his work is "vituperative" (p. 400), "dogmatic" (p. 407) and "procrustean" (pp. 399, 407), exemplifying "intellectual intolerance" (p. 407) and "absolutism" (p. 398)!

8.9 *Antirealism as Unsustainable*

Of course, authors do not take seriously the implications of, or sustain, the antirealist constructivist philosophy that they promote and identify with postmodernism. As illustrated in the work of Mahoney, Neimeyer, Gergen and others, they cannot; it is self-contradictory and unsustainable. On every page of the constructivist and social constructionist literature one finds assertions of putative fact: about the problems with positivism, about the nature of science, about the importance of meaning, about events that happened in the life of clients, about the logic of explanation, about the history of psychotherapy, about the errors of their critics, and so on. All of these are claims about what is the case, reality, about what is true, in the most ordinary sense of true. It beggars belief to think these writers don't mean these assertions to be true, not just for themselves, but for those to whom they write—or why would they write it? To say, then, that these assertions are neither true nor false (and what would the status of that claim be?), or that there is no access to reality to warrant them, is in contradiction to every statement in the literature. It is incoherent. Similarly, the claim that the notion of contradiction is merely part of an optional set of socially constructed rules (Gergen, 2001), a logic game (and how would

one know if a rule had been rightly applied or not?), excludes itself from rational discourse.

Neimeyer, Bruner and other theorists of meaning advocate, conduct or appeal to empirical studies, treating the events to which they refer as facts. They also appeal to observations of individual and cultural variations in meaning or other factual discoveries to support their views. Following a discussion of anti-objectivism, and a few pages after disparaging the idea that reality is "in principle knowable" (Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000b, p. 5), Neimeyer and Raskin appeal to the piece of knowledge that "a number of constructivist and narrative therapies have been evaluated by controlled outcome studies, with promising results" (p. 9)! Empirical studies, that is, discerning patterns and correlations between events in the world, depend for their sense on the very idea of objective knowledge that Neimeyer and others are attempting to repudiate. Similarly, the argument to constructivism from the variability of meaning is based on evidence: it is an argument from the facts of the situation to a denial of factuality. Now, my characterization of my target authors as *antirealist* may mislead. I mean, of course, that they are realist, as all participants in proper discourse must be, *but they attempt even in that realist discourse to defend antirealist theses, and this is incoherent*. It is the incoherence, not strictly the antirealism, that is the problem. This is why calls for realists to show what realist psychology can produce (Stam, 2001) miss the point. A non-realist psychology *ipso facto* produces nothing. Realism proper is not a theoretical option but immanent in discourse (Hibberd, 2001), or as Searle engagingly puts it (Allman, 1998; Searle, 1995, p. xiii), a "condition of sanity". A requirement of any psychology is to produce an account of human action that is coherent. If this could be done within the sort of transformative and critical aims that Gergen promotes, or the reconstruing therapeutic programme of personal constructivists, it would be realist. The depth and persistence of self-contradiction and blindness to conflicting implications in constructivist writings can be astonishing. To take Gergen again: even in responding to

Maze's (2001) accusation that he is in self-contradiction and admitting that this is a "substantive issue" (Gergen, 2001, p. 428), he attacks the very idea of self-contradiction, treating the logic of identity (any meaningful term must have a logical opposite) as merely a set of discretionary game rules, cultural artefacts. In response to Maze's critique of Derrida's 'both/and' logic—a scheme designed to allow that something can simultaneously be both true and not true, itself and not itself—Gergen asks, "what if one does not wish to play by Maze's particular rules?" (p. 429). The answer is of course that one relegates oneself from rational discourse—the point that Maze so nicely made.

It may be thought that Harré's (1986) 'constructionist realism' is a counter-example to the critique of social constructionism I have been pressing. I am unsure of the compatibility between Harré's explicit realism and the position I have been setting out here—that would be the topic of another study. However, realists are paradoxically concerned not strictly with demonstrating the value of 'the realist position' but rather, through critical analysis, with preventing (realist) positions that degenerate in their implications into incoherence. There is nothing in the obligation that a psychology be consistent with the realism necessary to discourse that is incompatible with the view that social and discursive practices affect how people act, or shape mentality, motive and meaning. It is when constructivism, presented as it commonly is as a general account of knowledge and reality, tells us that objective knowledge is in principle not possible, or that there are many incommensurable realities created by persons, that it collapses into incoherence, and so may be termed *antirealist*.

9. The Implications of Metatheory for Practice

Two problems are created by attempting to support a tolerant pluralism and relatedly a stress on meaning in psychotherapy by appeal to a tolerantly pluralist philosophy of constructivism. First, it is

simply wrong to think that the latter either genuinely supports the former, or that tolerance of differences and varieties of meaning within psychotherapy is the same thing as the (impossible) tolerance of different, constructed truths and realities. Pluralist epistemology—the idea of many equally valid truths and realities constructed by persons—is self-contradictory and utterly permissive: it is as supportive of therapeutic dogmatism as of therapeutic tolerance.

The second problem is that it gives a false and grossly oversimplified picture of the relation of metatheory to practice. This is the case both with the promotion of constructivism as a metatheory with implications for practice, and with the critique of the effects of orthodox empiricism on practice given in the meaning-making literature. Just as we are told that pluralist tolerance is the isomorph, and implication, of a tolerantly pluralist epistemology, so we are told that an objectivist theory of knowledge is an authoritarian epistemology and an isomorph of the dehumanizing, intolerant practice to which it leads. This creates the false expectation that metatheory must have this sort of direct application to practice, in particular that epistemology guides the morality of practice. The request that realists show what a realist psychology, in this case a psychotherapy, can produce is one consequence of this expectation. Yet this view of the application of metatheory to practice, in particular that there is a moral carry-over from metatheory to practice, is one part of what I contend is discredited: epistemology can only show vice or virtue, be authoritarian or tolerant, if knowledge is a social (moral) construction. It wrongly assumes that knowledge is a social construct.

It is, moreover, an expectation that I cannot live up to: there is no easy-to-apply metatheory that will tell psychotherapists how to treat clients. The tolerance urged by the psychotherapists of meaning is to be encouraged, not because truth and reality are mere constructions and we must respect others' realities, but because even

the most casual examination of the history of psychology, and of the record of psychotherapy, reminds us of the facts that we often get it wrong, how hard it is to get it right, and the dangers of closed-mindedness in such a difficult discipline. Of course I believe this to be true and not a mere construction. If I held the latter view, then I would indeed have licence for authoritarian or any other kind of practice.

Nonetheless this is not a counsel of despair. Analyses that point out problems in theory and metatheory at least tell us the places where not to find the right answers, and this has useful consequences. I have argued that constructivist argument fails to support a meaningful psychotherapy. However, if my account of meaning is on the right lines, that is, much of the meaning in which therapists are interested is motivational, then that demands an examination of motivation, a topic almost abandoned in the epistemic focus of cognitivist and constructivist therapies (Mackay, 1994, 1997). Outside the clinical field, various authors have argued that the clearing out of antirealist assumptions in such areas as cognitive-experimental and self psychologies (Maze, 1983, 1991), measurement theory (Michell, 1997) and the study of language and symbolism (Petocz, 1999), while not in itself producing empirical theory, promises the possibility of explanations that are not self-defeating. Valuable studies of social concepts (meanings), of the power relations that affect human conduct, and of the psychotherapeutic consequences of how persons construe the world have come from constructionist and constructivist psychologies. Yet in the end they are undermined, not legitimized, by constructivist epistemology, and can be carried out without any assumption that reality is created by persons.

10. Conclusion

The impulse to constructivism is founded on genuinely important insights, amongst which is the importance of meaning. Attacking

constructivist philosophy is, then, easily seen as an attack on the importance of meaning, and an endorsement of the conventional empirical psychology that has, for the better part of a century, relegated meaning and intentionality to the margins. Constructivists are right to stress fallibility, flexibility and tolerance, and to be wary of orthodoxy—particularly in such a confused discipline. We can join with Neimeyer and others in their focus on meaning and their objection to treating psychotherapy as a "behavioral health delivery system" (Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000b, p. 7). Scrutiny of such matters as the ethnocentrism of conventional clinical psychology and its instruments (Castillo, 1997; McLeod, 1997) and the promotion of the awareness of cultural variation is similarly important. And critical analysis of orthodox empirical psychology is vital: much that passes for 'behavioural science' is a mere empiricalism, the application of powerful but dubiously relevant statistical methods to inadequate primary data in order to support conceptually inadequate 'models'. However, my argument has been that these points may all be made independently of constructive metatheory and postmodernism with its incoherent epistemology. Indeed, as Petocz (2001) points out, the poor handling of meaning by those hostile to science and to the possibility of objectivity merely serves to entrench conventional empirical psychology's narrow view, that meaning (both motivational salience and symbolic) is irrelevant to psychology.

The meaning-making literature presents an erratically moving target. Hostile to the canons of argument and evidence, it is careless of consistency, mixing an apparent acceptance of commonsense realism with attacks on basic realist concepts: truth, reality and objective knowledge. Often, accusing a constructivist of antirealism brings in reply an apparent affirmation of realism—"as a constructivist, I have never said . . . that there is no ontic world but I keep saying that we cannot know it" (von Glasersfeld, 1991, p. 1)—or the evasive tactic of claiming that it is not of importance (Neimeyer, 1995c), or merely one optional form of discourse (Gergen, 1998; Shotter, 1993). However, most of the work is aimed not just at open-

ing up the possibilities of practice but at *justificati*on of this by undermining the possibility of objective knowledge. This is an attempt by the postmodern 'anti-establishment' programme to undermine the very standards of objectivity that would be a challenge to their position—while overlooking the fact that such standards would also be required to support postmodern, constructivist or any argument. If there is no objective and knowable reality, but only incommensurable and particular subjective or social realities, then fact, evidence, logic, rational argument, brought in opposition to constructivism may be dismissed as part of a defunct epistemology. Thus it mischievously makes the constructivist position itself absolute and indisputable, and quite unlike its self-portrait as tolerantly pluralist (Gergen, 2001; Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000b)—while caricaturing realism as absolutist and "genuflecting to objectivism" (Mahoney, 2000, p. 51) or a "rage for the real" (Gergen, 2001, p. 423).

The attempted subversion of the notions of objectivity, truth and reality is deeply dangerous for psychology and for rational debate. It erodes the very requirements of intelligible, meaningful discourse—an irony given the constructivist and social constructionist literatures' emphasis on meaning and discourse. The self-protection built into the doctrine of constructivist epistemology is surely as insidious as any orthodox dogma in science and psychology.

The real problems of contemporary psychotherapy, psychology and the analysis of meaning should not be allowed to push psychotherapists into the arms of deeply irrational philosophies—however dressed up they may be in fashionable academic terms. It is the interaction of persons with objects via beliefs that gives meaning to events and objects, not the autonomous creation of reality by persons. The meaning of something is the salience of that something to the person, specifically motives, and is objective. This renders the genesis of meaning determinate and in principle investigable. Meaning is returned to its place as a legitimate and important topic for psychology.

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