ABSTRACT

It is the purpose of this short article to defend the realism of Holmes Rolston and other environmental philosophers against the social constructionism of Neil Evernden and others who have written on the social construction of nature. This defense is attempted through appeal to a deceptively simple example: seeing a bear in a zoo. The following four claims are defended in the effort to show the deficiencies of the anthropocentrism of social constructionists like Evernden: (1) there is a difference between a bear in a zoo and one in the wild; (2) this difference legitimates the belief that the former is an attenuated version of the latter; (3) the danger posed by a bear in the wild is not due to an overly active imagination; and (4) experience of sublime beauty (in contrast to mere cuteness) in the presence of a wild bear is only partly of one’s own doing.

Many, perhaps most, philosophers working in the area of environmental philosophy exhibit, whether explicitly or implicitly, some version of epistemological and/or ontological realism. That is, they are committed to belief in an objective outdoors, an external natural world that exists beyond human construction and upon which our theories are, or should

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be, based. One example of this pervasive tendency is provided by the work of Rolston (1988, 1997). This is in contrast to a popular and growing tendency in ethics, epistemology, and ontology toward what can be termed “social constructionism” and away from “realism.” Some extreme social constructionists even talk of the social construction of nature (Evernden, 1992; King, 1990; Mullan and Marvin, 1987; Vogel, 1998). It will be the purpose of this short article to defend Rolstonian realists against these social constructionists, especially Evernden. I will do so through appeal to a deceptively simple example: seeing a bear in a zoo.

It must be admitted that a plurality of accounts can be called “social constructionist.” I will concentrate on Evernden’s (1992) subtle, well-written account, which, despite all of its virtues, contains a basic tension. On the one hand, Evernden, along with environmentalists in general, laments the fact that we often “sustain the remnants of a fading species in reserves or outright captivity” and as a result we bring about the “abrogation of [an animal’s] autonomy” (pp. 121, 130). On the other hand, in Evernden’s view it is not only our modern, mechanized view of “Nature” that is a social construct but also the very idea of “nature” we have inherited from the ancient Greeks. Paradoxically, Evernden claims that, “One might even say that there is no ‘nature,’ and there never has been.” Or again, “We are going to have to admit our own role in the constitution of reality” such that “before the word was invented, there was no nature.” Nature is as much a human artifact, he thinks, as a traffic light. Although it appears that history or culture rests on nature, the reverse is the case: Nature is a social creation (pp. 24, 60, 89, 94, 99). I claim that these two tendencies in Evernden’s thought, in particular, and in the thought of social constructionists who have written on the social construction of nature, in general, are not compatible.

It is acknowledged commonly, even among environmentalists, that contemporary zoos do some things well: They put people in contact with nonhuman animals they otherwise would not see, and they help to save endangered species. But it also is commonly acknowledged among environmentalists that zoos by their very nature are morally problematic—even if they do not pander to consumer demand to be entertained. The problem quite simply is this: Is it not the case that zoos are, in effect, prisons that change the true nature or the authenticity of the animals held in captivity?
If animals are human constructions, however, it is difficult to criticize zoos on a consistent basis. The following two claims seem to be at odds.

1. The human experience of a captive wild animal (or of a descendent of a captive wild animal) destroys the animal’s true nature or authenticity (properties that are related to the wild animal’s independence); hence, there is a *prima facie* moral duty against capturing wild animals, a duty that perhaps can be trumped if the wild animals are captured for their own good or for the purpose of species preservation.

2. The notions of an animal’s real nature or of a real animal or of an authentic wild animal make no sense because animals are human constructions.

That is, it is comparatively easy for social constructionists to mouth the words, along with everyone else, that “zoos are morally problematic,” but it is by no means clear that the social constructionist can say these words consistently.

Of course, one response that hard-core social constructionists, who reject realist zoontology, could make at this point would be to soften their anti-realism into an epistemological position alone and not an ontological one. This retreat from hard-core social constructionism flirts with Kantian dualism, however, and with all of the problems traditionally associated with Kantian dualism: The phenomenal bear in the zoo cage or zoo lot is framed for us to see, and, were this possible, it would be much better to experience the noumenal bear in the wild. Social constructionists of this milder sort are skeptical, however, of whether we could ever experience an unframed bear that is not in some way or other an artifact of human cultural life. The problem is conceptual rather than empirical: Once brought to human attention, even in the wild, but especially in zoos, a bear is no longer a bear-in-itself because it can only be that away from human beings. That is, any human experience of an animal is influenced by culture in that no human being can completely stand outside of some culture or other.

I will not concentrate on the hard-core social constructionist position in that I assume that no social constructionist wants to claim that we create bears or any other part of nature *ex nihilo*. That is, by “real bears” I refer to wild bears rather than to non-illusory bears. It should be noted, however, that some critics of realist zoontology, like Evernden, nonetheless speak in such a way that they are open to the charge that they imply the obviously indefensible view
that we create bears *ex nihilo*. It must be admitted that the breeding of certain pedigree animals, along with the breeding of zoo-held animals where we choose the appropriate mates, constitutes a type of “creation” of animals on our part—as we will see.

With one recent author, we can legitimately ask of any social constructionist: The social construction of what? (Hacking, 1999). That is, I will assume that those who talk of the social construction of nature or of the social construction of bears are talking about our ideas of bears rather than about the actual furry objects in the world. I make this assumption out of a commitment to the principle of charity: it seems fairer to assume that the social constructionist is working within what continental philosophers refer to as the hermeneutical circle than it is to assume that they are defending an implausible metaphysical idealism.

I would like to spend the remainder of this short article outlining a critique of this neo-Kantian variety of social constructionism. The first response to the social constructionist that should be made is that there is much to be said in favor of the realistic (Peircean) notion of pragmatic coping. That is, our beliefs and practices allow us not merely to get by but also to describe enough of the real world to enable us to make useful demarcations between where our inevitable socially constructed intrusion into wild nature ought to be criticized and where wild nature’s intrusion into our socially constructed practices needs to be resisted. For example, when an ignorant hiker runs up a trail too quickly in “bear country,” such that around the first bend he bumps into a bear who mauls him, it is right to suspect that the hiker was unwittingly at fault. However, if a bear wanders into a suburban neighborhood and threatens the safety of people living there, it is correct to suspect that it was the bear’s unwitting “fault” such that it is legitimate to sedate and remove her. The issue is complex, however, when it is realized that this suburban neighborhood was previously “bear country.”

Second, I have no doubt that some reflective thinkers will disagree with my language and with my conclusions in the previous paragraph. But the point I want to emphasize through the above two examples regarding bears is that we ought not to confess complete ignorance regarding bears in the wild outside of our human, zoo frame. If we did confess such ignorance, pragmatic success at identifying the hiker as the source of difficulty in the example
above would have to be declared a miracle, perhaps brought about by pre-established harmony. As Rolston (1997) makes the point, “There is always some sort of cognitive framework within which nature makes its appearance, but that does not mean that what appears is only the framework” (p. 43). Or again, “We may not have noumenal access to absolutes,” but “we do have access to some remarkable [natural] phenomena that have taken place and continue to take place outside of our minds, outside our cultures” (p. 49). There is, from a theoretical point of view, a dynamic interrelationship between our social constructs and the world we attempt to describe and evaluate.

A Popperian way to make my point regarding the inadequacy of both the complete transcendence of the noumenal bear-in-itself and the paralysis produced by the collective solipsism exhibited by an ironclad social constructionist epistemology is as follows: Although our frameworks (theories, zoos, etc.) are social constructs, the real world against which we test and evaluate them is not a social construct. Frameworks may be barriers or even prisons, but breakthroughs occur because of either: (a) our own critical efforts to adopt other points of view so as to be objective or fair; or (b) the real world intruding when we least expect it into our frameworks so as to falsify or, perhaps, corroborate them (Popper, 1979, 1994).

In short, social constructionist neo-Kantianism in environmental philosophy is problematic for two reasons: First, it cannot account for the pragmatic judgments that are assumed by almost everyone working in the field (that zoos are morally problematic), including social constructionists, like Evernden; Second, it cannot account theoretically for either the intrusion of the real world into our frameworks or our ability to revise our frameworks in light of the evidence before us when such intrusion occurs. Of course, even environmentalists find some features of zoos exhilarating, specifically the closeness to dangerous wild creatures like bears. But this exhilaration plays off of the dialectical tension between “closeness” and “wildness” that is cancelled out in neo-Kantian social constructionism. That is, we can distinguish practically between wild and captive bears and we can theoretically learn something about the former even though we are there as the framers.

It should also be noted that our knowledge of bears in the wild need not be construed in essentialist terms, despite my language above regarding the noumenal bear versus the bear framed for us in zoos. Even our knowledge
of (real) bears in the wild is, in Popperian fashion, fallible because it depends on our socially constructed conjectures, which are nonetheless conditioned by the possibility of refutation in light of evidence from the real world. We are the measurers, but not the measure of bears, to use Rolstonian terms.

The fallibility of our socially constructed theories, however, does not require us to be skeptics. I have seen bears both in zoos and in the wild, and I felt I was in danger only in the latter case, especially when the bear in question was at close range. I take it that there is nothing tendentious in this feeling, nor is there anything anthropocentric in the pejorative sense of the term in commitment to the following four claims:

1. There is a difference between a bear in a zoo and one in the wild;

2. This difference legitimates the belief that the former is an attenuated version of the latter;

3. The danger posed by a bear in the wild is not due to an overly active imagination; and

4. Experience of sublime beauty (in contrast to mere cuteness) in the presence of a wild bear is only partly of one’s own doing.

It seems that both the hard-core social constructionist as well as the neo-Kantian social constructionist would agree with me in practice regarding all four of these claims, but why? (Clark, 1989, 1990, 1991). The entire experience one has of seeing a bear at a zoo is framed by the fact of captivity, as is emphasized by Jamieson (1985, 1997) in two excellent philosophical articles about zoos. The problem with the social constructionist approach to environmental philosophy, in general, and to zoos, in particular, however, is that it is by no means clear on this view that animals are freer in the wild than they are in zoos (Leahy, 1991). This defect is a grave one. Consider that most attempts at reintroducing animals into the wild after having been in zoos have failed (Beck, 1995). This is a state of affairs that should make us skeptical of the defense of zoos in terms of their ability to save endangered species. Only putting large areas of the earth off limits to humans who want to do more than visit as inconspicuously as possible can, in the long run, accomplish the good of saving endangered species. Over several generations, not only the behavior but also the genetic makeup of captive populations can
change. The genetic changes would be due to the lack of genetic diversity among captive animals, which often leads to serious problems associated with inbreeding. Over long periods, wild animals are, in effect, turned into semi-domesticated ones.

Ultimately, zoos are for us rather than for animals: Zoos entertain us, they help to alleviate our guilt regarding what we have done to bears and other wild animals. Of course, if one actually believes that we construct nature, epistemologically and/or ontologically, then this anthropocentrism might not be as bothersome as it might otherwise be, even if some social constructionists like Evernden dream of “creating” a natural world that is supposedly non-anthropocentric. Good zoos are better than bad ones, it must be admitted, but naturalistic environments for bears are not nearly natural ones, no matter what social constructionists say about the matter.

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**Note**

1 Correspondence should be addressed to Daniel A. Dombrowski, Philosophy Department, Seattle University, Seattle, WA. E-mail: ddombrow@seattleu.edu. The author has benefited from an article-in-progress by Ralph Acampora, “Animal and/as appearances: Is there an organism in itself?”

**References**


