I wholeheartedly follow this convention here. Swartz provides a very lucid, and in many ways appealing, Rortian perspective on social construction and rightly points out areas of my argument that are in need of clarification and refinement. By the end of “Pragmatist Response” I am more knowledgeable of Rorty's position on a number of issues and quite convinced that the Rortian version of constructionism bears scant resemblance to the version of constructionism I believe dominated the writing field in the last decade. But then, I have never said otherwise.

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Notes

1 Of course, “what kind of realism is defensible?” is an issue that routinely attracts the attention of philosophers. For more complete discussions of this point I would refer readers to Chapter 11 of Michael Devitt's *Realism and Truth* and Rorty's own “Beyond Realism and anti-Realism.” Both pieces suggest that Rorty is not as dogmatically anti-realist as I believe Swartz presents him or as Rorty sometimes presents himself. In fact, according to Devitt, for Rorty, the independence of reality from perception is “true, but boring” in its self-evidence (205).

Works Cited


Appealing to Philosophy in Composition Studies

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I am attracted to the promise of Donald Davidson’s efforts to avoid conceptual relativism and certain epistemological problems by rejecting the divorce of “conceptual scheme” from “reality” that these problems are based on. Dave Smit’s article in *JAC* 15.1 directs our attention to the applicability to
writing instruction of Davidson's philosophy and gives some useful guidance through the debate over foundationalism and antifoundationalism. Although there is much to praise in this article, I have two reservations about Smit's discussion: first I would like to correct his misleading representation of process philosophers, and second, I would like to comment on his diminished view of philosophy.

Smit suggests an affinity between Davidson's approach and Wittgenstein's "believing game" (19). Smit is probably correct about the Davidson/Wittgenstein connection, but his further effort to ally the process philosophers Peirce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne with Wittgenstein's style of not doing philosophy is, quite simply, a misrepresentation of their ideas.

Smit's treatment of James Hikins fails to fully clarify a common misunderstanding that may help explain his gloss on these constructive postmodern philosophers. Hikins is a strong spokesman for a realist position in rhetoric studies, and he is frequently burdened with the duty of representing foundationalism. But realism need not entail foundationalism, if by foundationalism we mean a system built up from indubitable, infallible, context-independent beliefs, or as Smit says, the claim to provide a "necessary and sufficient rationale for believing in the objectivity of a material world" (30). Hikins is certainly not a foundationalist in this sense as he and Richard Cherwitz clearly pointed out in their response following Jeffery L. Bineham's misinterpretation of their position in a recent article in Philosophy and Rhetoric. Cherwitz and Hikins remark, "we have written of a world comprised of a vast multiplicity of relationships, of complex collections of relata that, as the objects of human inquiry, reveal themselves not in their totality, but by disclosing limited aspects or circumscribed dimensions" (239). For Cherwitz and Hikins, knowledge of this relational complex is never "positivistic" but nevertheless is still "about the real world."

So when Smit praises Davidson for his ability to "finesse the entire problem of how much we can trust our sense of the material world" he is suggesting that the strategic omission of ontological concerns is our best bet for not getting lost in the hall of mirrors. One of the things I like about Cherwitz and Hikins' position is that they have stayed with the philosophical problems and not succumbed to talk about the "end" of philosophy, talk that many have argued creates more problems for rhetoric than it solves. Likewise, David Ray Griffin brings together this group of constructive postmodern philosophers precisely because in various ways they have worked through the problems bequeathed by modernism rather than taking the typical postmodern path around them. According to the essays in Griffin's anthology, process philosophers support a realist ontology, a workable understanding of the correspondence theory of truth, and a panexperientialist metaphysics that allows them to work through the traditional problems of nineteenth-century epistemology instead of ignoring the problematic legacy of empiricism and
rationalism. One point that each of these constructive postmoderns make in their own way is that it is really impossible in experience to doubt certain vague intuitions, though these "privileged beliefs" are not infallible in their verbal formulation. Constructive postmodernists do not claim that failing to not doubt them is merely impractical as Smit remarks. These two arguments are very different: theirs is based on a certain kind of metaphysics, whereas Smit's notion that "there is little practical reason to doubt them" stems from a refusal to do metaphysics (19).

Process philosophers, then and now, are metaphysicians, though they sometimes have invented new names for their philosophizing, in part, to disassociate themselves from the kind of metaphysics that Peirce's "fallibilist" philosophy criticized. Hartshorne's philosophy, for example, is described as a "deep empiricism," James's as a "panexperientialism," and Whitehead's, as a "rational empiricism." Peirce says that certain ideas are "functionally indubitable." Whitehead never believed he could get off so easily as saying that we should choose one philosophical belief over another because it is merely practical or because we choose to play a certain kind of language game. The whole force of his speculative philosophy is designed to explain common sense, not leave it as an unexamined starting point. The constructive postmodernists' insistence that there is a layer of experience common to all humanity—privileged intuitions within the set of fallible beliefs—is presented systematically with logical and metaphysical support by Peirce and Whitehead. Smit is correct in concluding about these philosophers: "This is not foundationalism in Fish's definition by any means... but it does suggest that our 'mere beliefs' are more firm and stable than radical antifoundationalists suggest." This statement is accurate, but Smit does not tell readers that Griffin's constructive postmodern philosophers have vigorous metaphysical theories that support realism against extreme antifoundationalism while still not making infallible or foundationalist claims.

My second point relates to Smit's view that compositionists think of philosophy as a source of metaphors to guide instruction. Smit's insight is that a good philosophical metaphor is more influential in composition studies than a decade of experimental research. But I have to wonder why Smit, like his proverbial man on the street who does not feel lost in a hall of mirrors and mostly trusts his perceptions, wants to take up Davidson's philosophy at all. As Smit points out, Davidson does not address traditional philosophic problems, but "carefully sidesteps" them. Davidson's vague appeal to direct or naive realism—"In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false" (20)—is finally not satisfactory as philosophy if it ignores, rather than works through, the original problems in the history of philosophy that have caused philosophers to question common sense. After all, naive realism
certainly reflects common sense, but philosophers have traditionally had problems explaining why it is common sense rather than nonsense. Speculative metaphysics—including process philosophy—should be understood as an interrogation of experience; it endeavors to elucidate common sense, and this is a pursuit many in composition studies could profit from, not because it supplies a new metaphor, but because it illumines our experience, fosters self-disclosure, and makes self-evident what was vague or unclear in our experience. On the other hand, if common sense is the “solution,” then I fail to see why Smit should bother with philosophy in the first place.

Recent appeals to an “externalist” philosophy, in my opinion, correctly recognize the dead end of Kantianism and its contemporary dualist variants as they show up in expressivist, cognitivist, and social constructionist composition theories. But the descriptions of externalism I have read in JAC and other composition journals (and Smit’s discussion supports this observation), though illuminating some aspects of our experience, ultimately fail to show what role the alternative theory might play in a systematic understanding of experience and therefore risk the charge of being either a trivial linguistic finesse or piecemeal philosophy. Perhaps this is why Smit locates their value in the metaphors they supply. As Smit points out, Davidson does not say what this common “sense of the material world” is, and Davidson “avoids the problem of empiricism.” If a systematic, coherent understanding of experience is ignored as a goal of philosophy, as is the case today even among the metaphysically oriented analytic philosophers, then I cannot see how to judge the adequacy of any particular metaphysical hypothesis. In contrast, the example of Whitehead shows an attempt to provide a metaphysical system that can interpret and explain experience so that “everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme” (4).

Composition studies may profit from new theories that draw attention to some previously ignored aspect of our experience—fresh and stimulating metaphors that will inspire better instruction—but the process philosophers that Griffin calls “constructive postmodern” have much more to offer: these philosophers present a rich system of general ideas to draw on, and from Whitehead, for example, a “coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted” (3). Such a description as Whitehead offers could do two things: it could suggest new ways to understand experience, including experience writing, and it could illumine common sense and everyday experience by showing in what sense it is a concrete instance of the general metaphysical theory. This is an ideal, but we cannot come closer to it by substituting an “externalist” theory for an “internalist” theory unless we are clear about what makes one such theory better than another—and Smit is right, this includes successful application of our philosophy. But what counts as a successful philosophy? For process philosophy, the test of the metaphysical theory includes the
requirement that the general scheme be adequate to all experience and not merely applicable to just one experience. As philosophers of composition we need to do more than just forage after metaphors that work.

If so inclined, one can sidestep philosophical problems more easily by simply not talking about them anymore and taking the pedestrian stance that for practical purposes one gets along without philosophy just fine. Smit says as much, but he also says that antifoundationalism “ought to be a matter of lively debate in Composition/Rhetoric” (30). I have to ask myself why he thinks so. For if the role of philosophy in composition is simply to supply us with metaphors for instruction, we indeed have a shallow and diminished conception of philosophy, one we can also do without.

Smit writes, “And like Davidson, we need not worry about whether these target concepts are ‘objective’; we need only recognize that such objects and events are what other people refer to when they communicate . . . “ (28). Smit’s appeal—or Davidson’s appeal—to “practice” to rescue “theory” is nothing new in the history of this discussion. Whitehead discovered this antirationalist posture in Hume’s treatment of Locke. In *Process and Reality* Whitehead writes:

> Hume himself introduces the ominous appeal to “practice”—not in criticism of his premises, but in supplement to his conclusions. Bradley, who repudiates Hume, finds the objective world in which we live, and move, and have our being, “inconsistent if taken as real.” Neither side conciliates philosophical conceptions of a real world with the world of daily experience. (156)

Surely this conciliation ought to be part of the business we take up as we appeal to philosophy in composition.

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**Works Cited**


