As a long-time constructivist who has recently begun to teach the History of Psychology, I have had the opportunity to gain close acquaintance with a number of perspectives on philosophy and psychology that have evolved over the course of human history. Throughout this process I have recurrently experienced the intriguing sense that several viewpoints from the past seem highly convivial with many aspects of the constructivist thought that has occupied my attention for many years. While interwoven with contrasting and conflicting views, these themes suggested to me that the main issues that constructivism addresses have a longer past than I had known. It seemed compelling to me to examine some of the essential elements of constructivist psychology from this wider historical perspective. My personal passion for exploring this topic might suffice to justify digging deeply into a few approaches from our historic past. But the idea of looking for something valuable to us now in the thoughts of a couple of ancient Greek philosophies, a 3rd century Buddhist scholar, and two late 19th Century psychologists, also fits nicely with the constructivist and social constructionist view that human ideas and beliefs emerge within a context that evolved over the course of human life, and that past thoughts and ideas have shaped what we now believe.

As I initially did, you may also tend to view constructivism as a recent, contemporary movement, evolving within a post-modern critique of the current dominant world view. Perhaps we trace its roots in 19th Century European philosophy but we tend to see it as a decidedly a late 20th Century phenomenon. It might surprise us, therefore, to see a long history of very similar views, perhaps reflecting perennial topics in human understanding. We might also benefit from seeing how current scholars explore these ancient perspectives and understanding how an active debate on these topics continues today. Rather than simply of “historical interest,” our present understanding might benefit from exploring compelling past ideas. As Hales and Welshon (2006) put it, “…one of the chief virtues of reading the great philosophers of the past is the impetus they provide for one’s own reflections (p. 2).” By reviewing some perspectives from the past, and considering contemporary scholarship on these perspectives, we may gain inspiration, see our passions and commitments in a wider perspective, and think about familiar issues in new ways. Newly discovered “old” ideas might contribute to a richer, more elaborated view of contemporary constructivist psychology and give greater persuasive power to the benefits we see in this approach. They might help us expand constructivist psychology’s scope by incorporating new ideas and practices adapted from other convivial viewpoints.

Before delving more deeply into the contexts for this exploration, let me provide a brief mention of the five perspectives that I wish to discuss and that I hope to persuade you have some benefit to explicating current constructivist and constructionist psychology. We will start back nearly 2500 years ago, in the 5th Century, B.C.E., to
consider Sophism, particularly the work of Gorgias, who argued that we cannot identify any independent ground for justifying the ultimate truth of our knowledge but we certify conventional beliefs as true on the basis of persuasive debate. Moving forward a hundred years or so and then into the current era, we will then explore Pyrrhonian Skepticism, which agrees that we cannot establish the truth of any idea and thus gives up on seeking truth, finding peace and tranquility in the conditioned participation in conventional views without giving assent to any beliefs. Next, we will contemplate Madhyamika Buddhism as articulated by Nagarjuna around 300 C.E., and its view of phenomena as interdependent, impermanent, and lacking in its own essence, and how humans create dissatisfaction and suffering by treating conventional labels of phenomena as real. Making a larger jump in time we will investigate Nietzsche’s Perspectivism of the 19th Century, which proposes that individuals develop various perspectives on reality that reflect their personal psychology, that none reflect ultimate reality, and that human fulfillment come from committing ourselves to realizing our personal fictions. Finally, we will investigate William James’ Pragmatism as he articulated it about 100 years ago in the beginning of the 20th Century, suggesting that we create the truthfulness of our beliefs not through correspondence with independent reality but through practical application. As I explore these ideas and perspectives, including contemporary scholarly views on each, I hope you will feel persuaded that 1) each of these individuals would feel very much at home with our contemporary constructivist perspectives and that 2) their ideas have something valuable to offer to us today that can enrich and elaborate our ideas and practices.

As I begin this undertaking, with the hope that you will find it interesting, I wish from the outset to establish as consciously as possible the reflexive nature of what I have to say, in the context of the ideas themselves. By that I mean that I will attempt to the extent possible to apply the constructivist and constructionist ideas that I will describe to my own process in researching this topic and writing this document. This means, for example, that I wish to state clearly that what follows does not represent a “balanced” or “objective” scholarly inquiry that attempts to provide “fair” coverage of all extant viewpoints on these topics. (We will see, in the process of this undertaking, several effective arguments that suggest the impossibility of such a project.) I recognize my personal preference for constructivist views over the alternatives, and I acknowledge how that preference guides what I see and what I attend to. I recognize my personal predilection for seeing similarities and connections among various viewpoints. I acknowledge that I have chosen these approaches to discuss, the elements of the approaches that I focus on, and the particular sources I have used to explicate them, because they happen to fit with my existing biases. Finally, I make no claim that what I have to say represents anything other than my best attempt to articulate what seems compelling to me and to attempt to construct an argument that will persuade you to see something interesting in it along with me. Certainly, consistently with what I will have to share, I have no basis for making claims to the truth of what I have to say or to any independent justification for my argument.

**Common Elements of Constructivism**

As a context for discussing these viewpoints that I find compellingly convivial with current constructivist psychology and social constructionism, I wish to clarify what I see as the essential elements or components of this general constructivist perspective.
Although drawing on the excellent work of colleagues who have articulated these issues more deeply than I (Chiari & Nuzzo, Raskin), I take full responsibility for the following as my view. I also hope, of course, that you agree with this view and see it as compatible with your own understanding.

To me, all of the perspectives that I will discuss, the historic and contemporary constructivist and constructionist views, agree generally with the following statements:

- We can find no independent, objective criteria for determining or verifying what we human beings believe as “real” or “true.”
- We cannot identify a basis for identifying or justifying the ultimate “truth” of any idea, belief, opinion, or theory.
- Human beings have created ideas, beliefs, customs, and practices, rooted in the context of communities and supported by language managed by members of the community.
- These beliefs and practices serve as a description of a conventional reality, and, within that context, members of the community define certain ideas as “real” and “true.”
- The major purpose of this socially agreed-upon conventional reality lies in its ability to assist us in creating a sense of order and predictability to our experience, coordinating our activities, and meeting our survival goals and human needs and desires.
- We can always consider alternative explanations to those that we currently use, and human history demonstrates that we continue to invent new ideas that replace existing ones.
- Since we cannot independently justify any idea we can regard ideas as useful fictions and we can use our audacity and creatively to pursue ideas that take responsibility for our lives and for advancing human life.
- We find it useful to recognize environmental, biological, and social constraints to the utility of ideas and beliefs, and these mitigate “wishful” thinking and ideas that do not lead to useful prediction.
- By recognizing our collective and personal participation in creating the reality in which we live, and gaining awareness of that process, we have the opportunity to create a more fulfilling, satisfying, and productive life, liberated from the confinement of dogmatic belief in the truth of our ideas, both collective and personal.

**Foundationalism: a Contrast to Constructionism**

Many approaches that describe how humans construct meaning and order from their phenomenal experience describe the process in terms of comparison and contrast. We notice the similarity and dissimilarity among various experiences. To fully understand a point of view we benefit from not only understanding what it stands for, but also what it contrasts itself with. I propose next to present a very brief discussion of how we might describe a “non-constructivist” view, or what I view as some main characteristics of perspectives that I see as contrasting with the constructivist views that I just described. I undertake this process with some trepidation stemming from my lack of firm grounding in philosophy, epistemology, cosmology, etc., but here goes, anyway.

Many philosophers use the term “foundationalist” to refer to those whose perspective contrasts with “antifoundationalists,” whose perspective, in my view, seems compatible with, if not identical to, most constructivist perspectives. Consigny (2001),
who we will discuss shortly in the context of Gorgias’ Sophism, summarized the foundationalist or realist perspective quite succinctly and very cogently:

- “Typically, foundationalists see truth or reality as an independent ‘ground,’ a starting point or origin that is ontologically, logically, and temporally prior to human inquiry and knowledge; that is independent of the contingencies of human life, culture, and language; and that serves as a criterion for claims to knowledge and meaningful speech (p. 61).”
- “Second, foundationalists tend to characterize human knowledge as the apprehension or observation of the truth that exists in the world (p. 62).” They may differ in terms of how we go about apprehending this truth, and we can identify a variety of methods that humans have accredited, including imagination or hearing muses, rational reflection, empirical observation, or scientific methods.
- “Third, foundationalist thinkers usually maintain that we are able to convey our knowledge of the truth in some type or mode of discourse (p. 63).” The accredited mode of discourse may range from poetry, correct speech, literal prose, scientific publications, etc.
- In sum, “…each foundationalist thinker maintains that there is an order or truth in the world that we may approach or apprehend if we use the appropriate faculty or are properly inspired and that we may communicate this truth if we speak in the proper manner (pp. 63-64).”

Two major methods for generating, verifying, and communicating knowledge, rationalism and empiricism, have evolved within foundationalist approaches, and the history of philosophy and human understanding has not only included the debate between foundationalists and antifoundationalists but also, within foundationalism, between rationalists and empiricists. To condense several millennia of debate into a single sentence, rationalists tend to believe that we can come to understand the “truth” behind our phenomenal experience in terms of abstract principles, concepts, and essences, while empiricists believe that we can develop knowledge of the “truth” by attending directly to the data from our senses. Science, as the dominant epistemological method of the modern era, combined empiricism and rationalism, and evolved other “isms” such as logical positivism, as the ultimate way of “discovering” the independent, pre-existing truth and articulating it in terms of scientific theories. Constructivists, of course, use both rationalism and empiricism in postulating constructed hypotheses about the nature of experience and attending to the outcome of predictions, but do not view them as means to absolute, independent truth. We will see questions about, and constructivist-compatible alternatives to, rationalism and empiricism emerging among some of the approaches we will consider.

Other than for the enjoyment of abstract philosophical speculation, and perhaps our own interest in constructivist thinking, why should we care about this foundationalist perspective? Simply stated, awaiting further elaboration below, we will see dangers to effective human life in believing that truth and reality exist and that we can know what they are. We will see these dangers, and their relevance to human life, expressed in at least three domains. From an epistemological perspective, we will see that the belief that with appropriate methodology we can know truth leads to rigidity of views, an unwillingness to revise views when new alternatives prove more useful, and to a variety of battles and “wars” among people who hold to the “truth” of their view. We can see
this mistake in Galileo’s formulation that because his theory accounted for observations better than rival view, it must actually reflect “reality” or “truth” (Barfield, Rowland). From a personal perspective, we can see the limitations in our own experience and the suffering that arise due to our attachment to the correctness of our beliefs. And from a therapeutic perspective, we can see how we can best help our clients by awareness of the personally and socially constructed nature of beliefs, etc. We thus have very practical reasons for raising concerns about an adherence to foundationalist perspectives.

In addition to foundationalism, as a major contrast pole to constructivist views, we might also consider nihilism and solipsism as alternate contrasting views that our perspectives will attempt to address. Nihilism, the view that we cannot know anything or prove that anything exists, may appear initially and superficially compatible with the constructivist view described above by agreeing that we cannot know truth directly. In 19th Century Europe, we will see nihilism emerging as “a state of despair consequent upon the complete loss of belief in the accepted world-view and its inherent values” (Morrison, 1997, p. 4). Succumbing to nihilism leads to a pessimistic view that since we cannot determine that anything actually exists, we cannot know anything in any meaningful way and we cannot communicate anything to anyone else. Solipsism, which tends to accompany extreme nihilism, proposes that all we can ever know is our own direct personal experience, but nothing meaningful about the phenomenal world other than our experience. These views prove destructive to human effectiveness and fulfillment, and we will see explication of dangers and limitations of nihilism arise in the discussion to follow. In several of these perspectives, we will see the argument that various views compatible with our constructivist bent provide a middle path between the dangers of the dogmatic rigidity of foundationalism and the isolation, chaos, and hopeless of nihilism.

The foregoing discussion, I hope, establishes a “launching pad” from which we may begin our journey of exploration. As we prepare to “blast off,” I would like to provide you with a brief description of the landmarks we are likely to see along the way as we consider each of the five perspectives in our constructivist context. Although we may not see an identical structure or organization in our discussion of each perspective, we should identify some recognizable themes in what each perspective has to say about:

- Can we know ultimate reality?
- What do we mean by truth?
- How do we view conventional social beliefs and practices?
- What hazards accompany belief in truth?
- How might we apply these ideas to human progress and liberation?
- What we mean by and the extent to which we can know, “reality” and “truth.”
- How human language and concepts operate and affect what we know and what we believe.
- Notions about ultimate reality and truth and social convention, and how conventions operate effectively in day to day human life.
- Psychological well-being and what we can apply to our personal lives, psychotherapy, and other social interventions.

As previously stated, we will consider not only the original ideas as articulated by the historical figures to which they are attributed but also contemporary and recent scholarship, demonstrating that these approaches remain current and fertile. We will also
relate the ideas in each approach to some current views within constructivist psychology. In particular, I will draw connections and parallels, often explicitly and directly; at other times more implicitly, with perspectives expressed in three constructivist approaches:

- **The Psychology of Personal Constructs** (Kelly, 1955; 1979), with its philosophical assumption, *constructive alternativism*, proposed that we can construe experience in a variety of ways, and that we use interpretations to make predictions or anticipate future events. Kelly emphasized this practical nature of constructs as templates or models anticipating the future, rather than as absolute truths. He viewed constructs as approximations, and emphasized that on one had yet invented an ultimate set of constructs that could predict everything. Thus, he assumed “that all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement.” (1955, p. 15).

- **Radical Constructivism** (Glasersfeld, 1984; 1995) views knowledge as a possession of the knower, constructed on the basis of experience, and emphasizes how human knowledge actively creates order out of our experience, rather than describing an objectively real structured world or an order that exists independently. Similar to Kelly, Glasersfeld sees the purpose of constructed knowledge as to help us make reliable predictions and states that no language or belief reflects an ultimate reality. For Glasersfeld, to the extent that our ideas and beliefs “fit” with our experience in terms of leading to validated predictions we can find that knowledge useful, and that this criterion of “fit” proves more meaningful and useful than the question of whether we can prove the ultimate “truth” of any of our beliefs.

- **Social Constructionism** (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994; Shotter, 1993) emphasizes how we live in a world that we humans have constructed and that we continuously reinforce our view of that world through our language usage. We can see as central to this view the idea that the reality in which we live owes more to the intersubjectivity of our social interactions, definitions, labels, and conventions than to an objective reality that exists independently of human construction and even personal, or individual, subjective experience. Social constructivism views concepts of self and personality as socially invented ideas rather than stable or essential characteristics with an existence of their own, emphasizing how we create these ideas out of verbal identity and conversation with others.

**Gorgias’ Sophism**

The generally accepted view of Sophism states that the term refers to a group of Greek philosophers and teachers who actively taught in about the 5th Century B.C.E in Athens, Greece (DeRomanilly, 1992; Hergenhahn, 2005). The Sophists taught logic and rhetoric, emphasizing public speaking, persuasion, and defense of one’s ideas. They focused on rhetorical techniques and practical success that stemmed from good argumentation skills that persuaded others and won them over to one’s point of view. Because they emphasized rhetorical technique, and, as we will see, the notion that persuasion represented the only truth that we can know, later foundationalist Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, came to characterize them at “tricksters” who manipulated language for persuasive ends. We can, however, view the Sophists from a different perspective.

The Sophists in participating in the debate among competing versions of truth claims came to the conclusion that we could not identify an independent, objective basis for assessing the validity or truthfulness of any proposition. Thus, they suggested that all
statements could be viewed as equally true or equally false. As we shall see shortly, the primary determination of which ideas become regarded as valid lies in the effectiveness of the rhetorical skills of the proponent of the idea. We will also see this notion as meaningful and productive when approached from a constructivist perspective.

Protagoras generally receives top billing as the most famous and perhaps the originator of the Sophists. His most famous quote, “Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are, and of the things that are not that they are not” (Guthrie, 1971, p. 183) has generated a multitude of interpretations, but according to Guthrie (1971), “(a)ll the direct sources agree on the general meaning of Protagoras’s saying, namely that what appears to each individual is the only reality and therefore the real world differs for each” (p. 171). It further suggests that “things” exist as a function of human interpretation and construal.

While Protagoras serves a central role in the history of Sophism, and his statement probably feels comfortable to a constructivist, I find the work of his colleague Gorgias deeper and more compelling from a constructivist perspective. Conventional assessments of Gorgias (e.g., Hergenhahn, 2005) often view him as a foundationalist, and subjectivist, nihilist, and solipsist. This characterization apparently stems from what some see as a superficial interpretation of his well-known three-part argument, based on our lack of an objective way of knowing the truth. Stated in an oversimplified way, Gorgias’ statement reads that nothing exists, if it did exist we could not comprehend it, and if we could comprehend it we could not communicate it to others. A simplistic, naïve reading of this statement might well lead one to see it as nihilistic and solipsistic, but a more constructivist view of what Gorgias meant might prove much deeper and meaningful. Consigny (2001), in a compelling study of Gorgias written from a post-modern perspective, regards this characterization of Gorgias as inaccurate and contradictory to Gorgias’ other writings, and he provides a well-reasoned and articulate argument for viewing Gorgias as an antifoundationalist whose views appear decidedly post-modern and constructivist. I feel a deep debt of gratitude to Consigny for his analysis of Gorgias’ perspective, and I will do my best to summarize it here.

When we read Gorgias as an antifoundationalist we can see that he does not propose the view that there is a gulf between our rational mind and an independent truth, as the subjectivist interpretation suggests, because that would presume that he believes that an independent truth could exist. Nor does Gorgias propose that empirical experience would lead to independent truth, grounded in a material world that we perceive with our senses, because that view, too, suggests the existence of an external world against which we can compare our knowledge. Instead, we can see Gorgias as challenging the entire project of attempting to ground knowledge in criteria independent of human experience and action. Gorgias thus does not try to show that truth lies beyond our ability to apprehend it, that we live in a deceptive, delusional world, or that we can’t communicate with others. He merely points out that a foundationalist view ultimately proves incoherent because it contradicts itself when it tries to characterize reality, cannot explain how we can know anything, and cannot explain how we can communicate.

Part of the problem lies in understanding Gorgias’ meaning when he questioned whether things exist. Consigny (2001) suggests that the Greek word that Gorgias used for “exist” relates not to existence in an existential or ontological sense, but truth or veracity—that the word means something more like “to be so.” From this perspective,
when Gorgias says that things do not exist, he views phenomena as real but that words used to describe phenomena do not define an essential nature of an object or reality, because phenomena change and decay. We will see this identical argument posed by Nagarjuna in Madhyamika Buddhism. Since we cannot identify an essential nature to reality, we cannot know how “the world is” in an ultimate sense, and we cannot communicate it to another.

To take the argument a step further, if we propose the existence of a criterion that can provide an independent ground for our knowledge, independently of human experience, then we could never have a way of knowing if our knowledge matches that criterion because we could not find a separate point of view independent of our human point of view from which to see this objective world’s point of view. We can’t rely on our rational reason, because we know that we can imagine absurdities, like flying pigs. We cannot rely on our perceptions because our sensory modalities only give us limited information within specific sensory domains. In the final step of his argument, Gorgias proposes that even if we did assume that we knew the essence of phenomena, we could not accurately describe that knowledge in words because words represent a different category than the phenomena and our senses. We cannot communicate by words a phenomenon to another person who has not experienced it. For example, we cannot speak a color. If we communicate about something, the listener can only form an idea about it, but the listener would not form the same idea or thing as the phenomenon we experienced. We also cannot communicate or “transfer” mental images directly from one person to another, because one idea cannot be simultaneously present in two people and different people will interpret concepts in different ways.

We would find it very easy and compelling to dismiss this argument as suggesting that nothing exists, we cannot know anything, and that we cannot communicate anything meaningful. But Consigny (2001) argues that Gorgias view does not deny the possibility of knowing truths or communicating meaningfully:

On the contrary, he insists throughout On Not-Being that truths are not only possible but are commonplace, that we know what exists and does not exist, and that we routinely communicate the truth. What he denies is that ‘truth’ is a property of the ‘world itself’ and that this true nature of things is a foundation, or reference point, or criterion, for what we say (p. 73).

We now begin to see the direction Gorgias’ perspective takes us, similarly to other constructivist approaches, moving on from a critique of a foundationalist view of knowledge and truth to that of a humanly constructed reality, which provides humans with truth and meaning. Rather than locating the source of reality and truth in an independent criterion, Gorgias locates it in the verbal practices of the community. He views language and speech as a kind of a game, with propositions and arguments as a type of contest, and he suggests that words and human actions attain meaning within the conventions of the game. By viewing the development of knowledge as a competitive game, we can see speakers with rival ideas, beliefs, or practices competing with each other to “win” the contest through community approval. In general usage we see words as directly relating to things, but this reflects a foundationalist view. For Gorgias, the meaning of a word derives from how the community uses it. “A word does not have meaning because it represents a thing in the world or an idea in the mind; rather a word
has meaning because we use it in our lives, and thereby assign it a meaning” (Consigny, 2001, p.78).

This perspective should seem very familiar to us as an excellent description of the social constructionist perspective on meaning and language. Let me elaborate a little further. For Gorgias, knowledge and truth emerge from debates within a community in which individuals or groups attempt to persuade their audience regarding the viability or utility of their positions. The community members, the audience, interact with the speakers and actively participate in the knowledge generating process through their role in judging the quality of the arguments and determining the victor in the contest. In order to provide effective argument, the proponents of a viewpoint must share the conventional grounding of the community members and follow the rules of language, discourse, evidence, etc. Commonplace assumptions shared within the community’s conceptual context usually must be affirmed, and community members will judge the extent to which new views and positions sufficiently support the commonplace view that they, the audience, can accredit them as valid.

Within this context, Gorgias viewed “truth” as a term of praise, an award that the audience gives to the arguments or accounts that they find most persuasive. From this perspective, “truth” does not represent “discovery” of an accurate representation of a pre-existing independent world, but rather an endorsement of a persuasive argument.

To say that an account is ‘really’ true, or that it is ‘certain,’ merely means that a particular rhetor has presented a highly convincing case, one that we cannot, at the moment, counter with a persuasive retort. Since every claim is contestable, an absence of disagreement on an issue does not mean that people have discovered an objective truth; rather it means that they are so convinced by one account that they simply do not question it (Consigny, 2001, p. 91).

To wrap up our consideration of Gorgias’ Sophism for the moment, we can see a number of convivial constructivist themes that can strengthen, support, and elaborate a constructivist psychology. We can see a critique of the foundationalist project of seeking criteria by which we can affirm an independent notion of truth and reality, a view very similar to that taken by Glasersfeld in his Radical Constructivism. We can see an emphasis on language and community custom, rules, values, and practices as the basis for establishing what we regard as truth, a perspective analogous to social constructionism as articulated by Butt, Gergen and Shotter. Like Kelly, Gorgias’ perspective supports the idea that we can articulate a variety of alternative models, viewpoints, theories, hypotheses, etc., and that the “truth” or value of these alternatives emerges practically, from their implementation in anticipation and the results that they provide. We will see these themes emerge again as we consider the following perspectives, including the Skeptics, who emerged in Greece a century or so after the Sophists.

Pyrrhonian Skepticism

The term skepticism has evolved to mean many things to different people, so before we focus on a particular form of skepticism, it would help to clarify which meaning I propose to use here. We may use the term in a more trivial sense in day to day conversation as “incredulity,” when we question the veracity of a statement. We may do so from a foundationalist perspective, saying that we feel “skeptical” about a particular proposition (e.g., “pigs can fly”). By expressing our skepticism in such a case, we affirm
the idea that an independent truth or reality exists but we suggest that a particular proposition is not in accord with our understanding of that reality. Scholars in philosophy also describe another approach, Cartesian skepticism, which relates to Descartes’ view that the senses may deceive us, his attempts to doubt everything that he could doubt, and the ultimate position of uncertainty. Although Descartes did not practice Cartesian skepticism, the title has stuck. Instead of these perspectives, I propose to explore Pyrrhonian Skepticism, the perspective of the initial, original historical, skeptics in ancient Greece. Pyrrho, viewed as the founder of the Skeptics, was born twenty years after Gorgias’ death (circa 360 B.C.E.) and his views flourished in the work of neo-Pyrrhonians such as Agrippa (1st Century. C.E.) and Sextus Empiricus who provided the primary written record on Pyrrhonian Skepticism in the 3rd Century C.E. (Gascoigne, 2002). We will see that the views of the Sophists and the Skeptics had much in common, and we will also see some interesting differences that have useful implications for constructivist theory and practice and relate to following theories.

The rhetorical games of the Sophists represented one way to address the variety of competing claims for truth that humans put forth. By seeing truth claims as equally true or false, in the ultimate sense, and seeing truth as meaningful only in the conventional, language-based community-based sense, some people could, perhaps, find comfort and security. Others, however, found the conflict less palatable, and some continued to search for ultimate truth. Some of those, like Plato and Aristotle, continued to pursue a foundational approach; others abandoned the attempt. Skepticism derived from the desire to find peace and tranquility in the context of various conflicts of thoughts, ideas, opinions, beliefs, doctrines, and appearances. They attempted to find truth that will settle all of this conflict but are unable to find the truth or to decide among the conflicting views. Out of frustration, the skeptic gives up the search for truth in despair and unexpectedly ends up achieving the original goal of tranquility (Striker, 2004, p. 16).

The Pyrrhonian skeptic, thus, rather than making an intentional choice to abandon the search or proposing that one should suspend judgment, simple finds it impossible to find a satisfactory truth. By “giving up” on making judgment, the skeptic ends up, inadvertently, experiencing the peace and tranquility originally sought through attempting to find certain truth. We will see, through the skeptics and through Buddhist psychology, an important lesson in this understanding that has substantial implication for constructivist psychology and human well-being.

The Skeptical approach to inquiry does not demand that people justify their views or impose the burden of justification on others; they see others as imposing that burden themselves when they claim their belief as knowledge instead of opinion (Williams, 2004). When presented with a claim to truth, the Skeptic, following the methodology of Agrippa, asks for a justification of the belief, the grounds for knowing it as true, and how it differs from personal opinion. Any additional argument receives the same questioning. Any attempt to justify a belief leads to a circle of beliefs, in which we can never justify believing one thing over another. Ultimately, “the Agrippan argument implies that no belief is justifiable, even to the slightest degree” (Williams, 2004, p. 124, italics in original), and many philosophers concede that we can never defeat or refute the Agrippan argument (Unger, 1975).
For the Skeptic, however, our inability to justify belief can function as a means for a more grounded and satisfying life. Ultimately, the Pyrrhonian skeptic, by rejecting any form of dogma, finds peace and tranquility in ordinary daily life without judgment. Normative or evaluative judgment or belief can serve as a major barrier to tranquility, peace, and satisfaction in life. Sextus Empiricus, for example, states, “For those who hold the opinion that things are good or bad by nature are perpetually troubled...But those who make no determination about what is good and bad by nature...are tranquil” (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2004, p. 203). Skeptics go along with their beliefs without affirming or assenting to them, acting as neutral observer of their thoughts and feelings. They may treat some things as good and others as bad, and may feel pain, but they don’t make matters worse by adding a judgment such as that pain “is bad” or that piety “is good.” Sextus Empiricus, further states, “(T)he perturbation due to the belief about an evil as evil is sometimes greater than that which results from the so-called evil itself” (Striker, 2004, p. 20). We will see this theme repeated in our consideration of Buddhist psychology.

We might very well question the stance that the Pyrrhonian Skeptic takes with respect to conventional social beliefs and customs. We find that the skeptic follows the same beliefs as others but maintains greater peace of mind by not endorsing any of them as true. The tranquility of the skeptic thus differs from agitation and conflict that arise from the dogmatic assertions of those (both philosophers and ordinary people) who take their beliefs seriously. Skeptics view the behavior of following conventional beliefs as a conditioned response, that, as B. F. Skinner (1974) would remind us, does not require awareness or a conscious decision. Thus, while not assenting to the “reality” of conventional beliefs, skeptics would typically follow community rules and thus do not present a threat to the community. Skeptics can acknowledge the practical relevance of conventional beliefs and the use of comparison and contrast as ways of making statements about phenomena, consistent with Kelly’s approach to bi-polar constructs. In doing so, the Skeptic would avoid dogmatic assent that accepts a statement or belief as true and justified as well as approving beliefs as justified due to their agreement with other beliefs or their general plausibility. The Skeptic could, however, acquiesce to conventional belief and community practices (Striker, 2004) without making any assertions as to their ultimate validity.

Pyrrhonian Skepticism, thus, proves convivial with our emerging perspective that we cannot justify any beliefs, ideas, theories, or practices in terms of independent criteria or standards or foundations separate from human experience. Like Social Constructionism and Radical Constructivism, it supports adherence to the practices and beliefs that accompany the conventional, human constructed reality, but doing so in a way that acknowledges this reality as a convention and maintains awareness of the constructed nature of thoughts and beliefs. By doing so, the Skeptic may remain open to immediate experience and avoid entanglement in arguments about thoughts and beliefs as real and ultimately true. We will see this theme elaborated further in Nagarjuna’s Middle Way, a skeptical school of Buddhism, which we will address next.

Nagarjuna’s Middle Way, or Madhyamika, Buddhism

We build on the views of the Sophists and the Skeptics by jumping ahead several centuries and from Greece to India. Madhyamika, a highly skeptical and analytical school of Buddhist philosophy arose in the context of the debate described above, between foundationalism or realism and nihilism. Like Skepticism, Buddhism
approaches this debate from the context of addressing practical concerns about human
life. Buddhism suggests that treating phenomena as having ultimate reality leads to
dissatisfaction because we hold to things we desire and feel aversion to things we do not
like (echoing Sextus Empiricus), reify our beliefs as being “real,” and live in delusion and
suffering. If we take the alternate path of nihilism and solipsism, we find ourselves
without a means of relating effectively to phenomenal experience and other people.

Madhyamika presents a “middle way” between these extremes that, like Sophism
and Skepticism, neither denies the existence of reality nor acknowledges that we can
know ultimate reality. Like Sophism, Madhyamika states that phenomena (reality) exist
but that what we experience phenomenologically as “things” only occur in
interdependent relationship with other phenomena, constantly change, and lack
permanent essence “of their own.” As a result, we cannot identify independently existing
“things” to know. We can, however, know conventional reality, a socially and personally
constructed view of phenomena based on language and thought. Madhyamika
acknowledges the socially constructed nature of our daily reality, and how we use these
conventions to coordinate activities with others and create structure and predictability to
experience. It acknowledges that a phenomenal world exists, enabling us to avoid the
limitations of solipsism and providing a basis for ethical relationships among people.

The founding of the Middle Way school is attributed to Nagarjuna, a South Indian
Buddhist scholar who lived in the about second century of the Common Era,
contemporary to the period of neo-Pyrrhonist Skepticism in Greece. His major treatise
takes the form of a dialectical debate with other philosophical and scholarly viewpoints,
and systematically demonstrates the incoherence of any belief in the existence of
independent and permanent entities possessing their own identity and essence. My
understanding of this ancient Asian perspective benefits greatly from two recent
translations and commentaries of Nagarjuna’s primary text (Garfield, 1995; Luetchford,
2002), for which I feel a great debt of gratitude.

In the following explication I will review the Madhyamika position on the nature
of reality, which describes phenomenal experience in terms of three characteristics:
dependent origination or interconditioning, impermanence, and emptiness or lack of
essence. We will next consider the Madhyamika perspective on “reality,” including the
conventional view of the reality that we can know, based on language, thought, concepts,
etc., as contrasted with a view of ultimate reality, which we cannot know. Finally, we
will review some implications of this perspective, including the notion of self, for
constructivist psychology.

Dependent origination or interconditioning refers to the observation that
phenomena do not possess an independent nature. All phenomena that we perceive exist
relatively, in relation to other phenomena, consist of parts and pieces, and require human
intercondition one another sequentially in a series of chains” (p.251). Events we perceive
as “things” depend on other “things” for their identity. Composites consist of parts, gain
their identity only as an assembly of parts, and lose that identity when “taken apart.” The
identification and acknowledgement of “things” requires the process of human perception
and labeling for their existence. Thus, we cannot identify intrinsic “entities that persist
independently with those identities over time” (Garfield, 1992, p. 102). No phenomenon
has always existed in its current state or always will exist in that state or with those
qualities; phenomena come into existence when conditions that support their existence obtain and when those conditions no longer obtain the phenomena will no longer exist. We cannot distinguish phenomena from the ever-changing conditions that lead to their temporary existence and we cannot find an essence that determines their independent identity.

Emptiness, the most fundamental Madhyamika concept, suggests that since phenomena exist only in interdependence on other phenomena and constantly change we cannot identify any essence or identity to a phenomenon or entity that exists independently and permanently, or that constitutes the entity itself, gives it independent or inherent existence, nor represents its essence (in spite of the perennial search for essence in the history of foundationalist philosophy). We cannot identify a substance that gives a phenomenon permanent identity independently of its attributes. Ultimately, if we attempt to analyze the identity of phenomena, Madhyamika philosophy points out that we cannot find something to point to as the thing itself.

Many people exposed initially to this concept perceive this as a nihilistic view—that it proposes that “nothing” exists. Instead it proposes that “no thing” exists on its own. As Garfield (1995) eloquently stated in a view that we will see mirrored by William James, “Carving out particular phenomena for explanation . . . depends more on our explanatory interests and language than on joints nature presents to us” (p. 113). Again, and similarly to Sophism, Madhyamika philosophy acknowledges that the world, the phenomena we experience, does indeed exist, but states that we cannot point to an entity or thing and identify it as possessing its own independent, permanent, identity. Thus, again echoing Gorgias, any proposition that suggests that we know “ultimate truth” proves incoherent. What “it” could we ever possibly know when we cannot find any separate “thing” that exists on its own?

Madhyamika philosophy, like the Skeptics, will not make any “positive assertions about the fundamental nature of things” and denies “the coherence and utility of the concept of an essence” (Garfield, 1995, p. 100). Like the Sophists, Skeptics, and Social Constructionists, in acknowledging ordinary human assertions as being dependent on social conventions, it sees all truth as conventional and relative. Nagarajuna articulates this perspective by describing two coexisting perspectives on reality: ultimate and conventional, taking great care to caution that this difference does not propose the existence of two separate realities but instead “a difference in the way phenomena are conceived/perceived” (Garfield, 1995, p. 320). Since we can make no positive assertions about ultimate reality, for all practical purposes nothing ultimately exists. However, we can know reality conventionally, based on our experience of phenomena and our conventions about how we understand and speak about phenomena. The identity of these two truths of ultimate and conventional reality, somewhat paradoxically, derives directly from the dependent arising and emptiness of phenomena. This perspective was well expressed from a Western perspective by Zen student and practitioner Alan Watts (1961):

When Buddhist texts state that all things are falsely imagined and without reality of their own this can mean … that things are relative: they have no self-existence because no one thing can be designated without relation to others, and furthermore because ‘thing’ is a unit of description—not a natural entity (p. 48-49).
From the Madhyamika Buddhist perspective, conventional truth, similar to the constructivist and constructionist perspectives, consists of the ideas, beliefs, and practices that humans have developed, collectively and individually, to identify recurrent patterns and themes in phenomenal experience and to anticipate future events. We can use conventional reality to make predictions and coordinate activity with others. Like the Skeptics, the historical Buddha followed social convention, going along with beliefs and perspectives that proved useful and denying views that people in general would agree as incoherent. Conventional reality from the Buddhist perspective develops similarly to how Kelly (1955; 1979) described it. In our experience of phenomena, we perceive similarities and differences, repeated themes and patterns, and we invent word labels to describe the poles of the contrast dimensions. Contrasting poles arise together and depend on each other; good vs. bad, light vs. dark, up vs. down, for example, all relate to “empty” phenomena which not only do not possess these qualities inherently, but depend on human assessment for their very existence.

Madhyamika conventional reality corresponds to constructivist perspectives regarding the socially and personally constructed world, the extent to which our conventional reality serves human functions, and must respond to environmental, biological, and social constraints upon it; we cannot create just any reality we wish if we desire viable constructs (Glasersfeld, 1995). Garfield echoes this view:

They reflect our needs, our biological, psychological, perceptual, and social characteristics, as well as our languages and customs. Given these constraints and conventions, there are indeed facts of the matter regarding empirical claims and regarding the meaning of words. But there is no transcendent standpoint, Nagarjuna would insist, from which these conventions and constraints can be seen as justified (Garfield, 1995, p. 200).

Although we might find these philosophical perspectives intrinsically interesting, we may ask about the relevance of this understanding to psychological issues. As stated above, Buddhist philosophy and psychology arose out of a very practical concern, similar to that of the Skeptics, with alleviating human suffering and dissatisfaction. What practical implications come from viewing phenomena as dependent and empty and only speaking about a conventional, constructed reality? From the Buddhist perspective, when we confuse relative, dependent, impermanent, and empty conventional reality with inherent truth and ultimate reality, we tend to treat conventional beliefs and concepts as ultimately “true.” As Benoît (2004) stated, “Abstract ideas which rely on a discriminating process to give them a separate identity should not be taken literally and thought of as referring to distinct entities (237).” Garfield (1995) explicated this issue by pointing out our inherent foundationalist tendencies:

We are driven to reify ourselves, the objects in the world around us, and—in more abstract philosophical moods—theoretical constructs, values, and so on because of an instinctual feeling that without an intrinsically real self, an intrinsically real world, and intrinsically real values, life has no real meaning and is utterly hopeless. (p. 317)

Reifying constructed interpretations leads to living in a delusional world. Further, suffering and dissatisfaction stem from attempts to impose permanence, and independent essence out of the flow of experience, creating words for experience and conspiring to
agree with each other that the “things” to which our words refer actually exist. A classic Chinese Zen text, the “hsin-hsin ming,” echoes the Skeptical perspective of Sextus Empiricus in stating that a balanced and satisfying life comes when we stop seeking truth and cease cherishing opinions and describing placing what we like against what we dislike as “the disease of the mind” (Kornfield, 1996, p. 144-145?).

The concept of emptiness of phenomena applies as equally to the sense of self or ego as any other phenomenon (McWilliams, 2004a). Madhyamika sees the concept of self as dependent, impermanent, and empty. From the perspective of Buddhist psychology, a person consists of parts or elements, described as five attributes, aggregates, or skhandas: physical body, sensations, perceptions, conceptions and emotions, and awareness itself. Each of these elements depends on others, and we cannot identify among these elements or attributes a fixed, permanent essence that defines an individual or self. The notion of self, thus, emerges as a social convention, similarly to the Social Constructionist view. Alan Watts (1961) articulated a Zen perspective on the socially constructed sense of self, suggesting that society creates a game that makes each person an independent agent and then makes that agent responsible for its actions.

As stated above, Buddhist philosophy aims at reducing human suffering and dissatisfaction, and has developed practical techniques to further this goal. Meditation practices facilitate awareness of the socially constructed process of self and identity and assist in liberation from identification with social roles by seeing them as a game that has certain rules based on social convention and language rather than as rules of the universe, similarly to the Sophist view of reality. Applying the understanding of emptiness and the relationship between ultimate and conventional reality requires developing moment-to-moment awareness of how we continually reify our constructs and treat impermanent, empty phenomena as ultimately, rather than conventionally, real. Within Buddhist philosophy and psychology, a variety of meditation techniques can be seen from a constructivist perspective as providing a vehicle for gaining awareness of thoughts and experiencing the emptiness of phenomena, with the goal of liberating the individual from dogmatically clinging to reified concepts (McWilliams, 2000, 2003, 2004b).

Nagarjuna, in a view intriguingly parallel to the experience of the Pyrrhonian Skeptics, pointed out that our desire to cling to dogmatic, reified concepts of ourselves and the world as a means of creating hope and meaning leads to exactly the opposite effect and prevents actually reaching that goal. A reified world in which events, phenomena, and things exist just as we see and talk about them, permanently, independently, and with a fixed essence would not provide any hope for change, progress, or human action.

But if instead we treat ourselves, others, and our values as empty, there is hope and a purpose to life. For then, in the context of impermanence and dependence, human action and knowledge make sense, and oral and spiritual progress become possible. It is only in the context of ultimate nonexistence that actual existence makes any sense at all (Garfield, 1995, p. 318).

Madhyamika concepts of dependence, impermanence, and emptiness, along with the corollary concept of conventional, as contrasted with inherent, reality provides a middle way between foundationalism and nihilism, and accord well with many aspects of constructivist psychology: we cannot know ultimate reality but we can construct a set of
beliefs and practices based on our phenomenal experience and use them guide our lives and lead to useful predictions. We can judge the value of conventional reality, as Glasersfeld suggests, on the basis of its fit with experience, but we need not see fit as equal to truth. Buddhist psychology agrees with constructivist psychology that psychological well-being and effectiveness can benefit from awareness of the constructions, collective and individual, on which we base our lives, and maintaining openness to attending to immediate experience as the basis for assessing the validity and utility of our anticipations. Further, the view that the emptiness, or lack of essence, of phenomena provides us with an opportunity to create meaning to our existence accords very well with Kelly’s (1979) emphasis on human audacity, as expressed in “Ontological Acceleration,” as well as Friedrich Nietzsche’s focus on effective human life in terms of self-expansion, self-renewal, and an active approach to creating meaning in life.

Nietzsche’s Perspectivism

Thus, we next turn to Nietzsche’s philosophy and particularly his perspectivist view. A leap from second Century Indian Buddhism to 19th Century European Existentialism might seem extreme, although several scholars have drawn direct parallels between Nietzsche and Buddhism (Hales & Welshon, 2000; Mistry, 1981, Morrison, 1997), suggesting that Nietzsche was explicitly influenced by many Buddhist idea, particularly the notion of the lack of a substantial self. We will certainly see in Nietzsche’s bundle theory clear agreement with the Buddhist conception of self as an interdependent complex lacking a single substance. We also see that Nietzsche agreed with the other approaches we have discussed regarding the dangers of dogmatic, rigid, absolutist thinking and the desire for an approach to knowledge that allows for questioning sacred convictions. He further echoed the view that we humans develop beliefs to gain mastery over our experience and make it less chaotic, and that we fabricate or invent concepts such as subjects, objects, and attributes to suit human needs and ends. We will see in his view the notion that we can not identify any privileged perspective or language system from which we can assess truth claims (Olson, 2005). Finally, we will explore more fully Nietzsche’s expansive view of human life in the absence of truth and its implications for psychotherapy. The scholarly literature on Nietzsche’s perspectivism includes elaborate and detailed analyses of the complexity of his writing on the subject (Hales & Welshon, 2000), so we will only “scratch the surface” here.

I initially had my interest piqued by the proposition that many scholars see Nietzsche’s perspectivism, the idea that individual philosophers articulated their individual perspectives that could not reflect independent truths awaiting discovery, as a forerunner to postmodernism (Hergenhahn, 2005), and hence constructivism. For Nietzsche, individual insights do not represent universal truths as people (philosophers and ordinary individuals) tend to present them, but rather a product of the particular individual, and expression of their prejudices, passions, biases, etc. They thus represent a viewpoint or perspective through which the individual looks at their phenomenal experience. We can view Nietzsche, as he characterized himself, as a psychologist, interested the personal, even unconscious, prejudices in an individual’s statements, seeing them as an expression of the person’s psychology rather than a reflection of an independent reality.

Elaborating more fully on the implications of this “perspective on perspectives,” and in full compatibility with the viewpoints we have already discussed, Nietzsche
acknowledged the incoherence of the idea of absolute truths or eternal facts. We humans attempt to contact reality through a variety of methods, theories, paradigms, etc., none of which can reveal actual truth of the world or prove ultimately satisfactory. His “radical perspectivism” (Hales & Welshon, 1999), embedded any idea of truth in various interpretations or points of view, suggesting, as have our other approaches, that “(t)here is no objective body of the facts that exists independently of some specific perspective taken on them (p. 173). Nietzsche’s approach takes this view a step further by seeing the world itself as essentially chaotic and lacking an intrinsic structure of its own. He described as fictions concepts like unity, duration, identity, substance, etc., seeing them as human creations that assist humans in living. Echoing Radical Constructivism, he suggests that we create the structure, including notions such as cause and effect, because we find it useful for survival. The truth assessment of propositions depends on the context of the perspective from which it is taken, so different viewpoints will recognize various statements or true or false, depending on how they fit with the perspective at hand.

Again paralleling our previous viewpoints, we need not, as some have, view Nietzsche as a nihilist who did not believe that humans can ever develop truth. His perspectivist approach does not eliminate the search for knowledge; indeed, “he routinely praised truth and the search for truth” (Hales & Welshon, 1999, p. 174). Similarly to Kelly and Glasersfeld, Nietzsche saw truth as something that humans had responsibility for developing through an active process of creative construction. We impose regularity and order on the chaos of experience to suit our practical needs, but we need to recognize that the “truth” of our constructed interpretations remains relative to our personal perspective. Echoing Glasersfeld’s notion that we can only know a world that we have made ourselves, “Nietzsche writes … ‘we can comprehend only a world that we ourselves have made.’ Yet having made this world, we can have knowledge of it” (Hales & Welshon, 1999, p. 175).

Kelly (1955, 1979) repeatedly emphasized that individual humans have responsibility for “making something” out of their phenomenal experience because the universe does not directly tell us how we should understand it. Kelly also supported Vaihinger’s fictionalism, which takes the view that we can actively embrace beliefs that we know as fictions and use them to help us pursue our goals. Sharing these viewpoints, and a belief in the importance of human audacity, Nietzsche emphasized how we have the freedom and responsibility to act even when we face uncertainty, to create truths that support and serve our needs. In order to act strongly and decisively, we have to act as if our fictions represent truth, as if we have certainty (Olson, 2006). For Nietzsche, we create life-affirming values and actions, which serve to further and expand our lives even with no ultimate or independent basis for justifying or validating them. Consistent with Personal Construct Psychology, Radical Constructivism, and Social Constructionism, Nietzsche emphasizes that the criteria for our actions and beliefs rests in the extent to which they preserve and advance human life rather than on a justification for their ultimate truth. Again consistent with the other perspectives, for Nietzsche this life-affirming direction remains subject to evaluation and assessment by future experience and the extent to which it meets human goals, rather than an external criterion.

Life affirmation occurs at the collective and personal levels, and constructivist psychology emphasizes how individuals can use their creativity to construct a variety of
effective ways of living. As mentioned above, Nietzsche’s view of the individual corresponds very well with the Buddhist perspective (Hales & Welshon, 1999; 2000). Nietzsche viewed the self as a complex or bundle of elements and actions, comparable to the Buddhist aggregates, and saw cognition and emotion as relations among drives rather than as distinct independent actions. He did not see a basis for identifying a subject independently of these actions, but fostered a “view of the self as a loosely organized confederation of functional states and dispositions” (Hales & Welshon, 2000, p. 159). This composite Buddhist-Nietzschean view has fascinating implications for a constructivist perspective on self. We cannot identify an identity possessed by an individual independently of a particular perspective and thus no objective identity for an individual that persists across time (Wales & Helshon, 1999).

This perspectivist view of the individual as “no-self-as-a-fixed-entity” has significant for constructivist approaches to psychotherapy. It suggests that we cannot identify independent criteria for determining what mental health means, independently of a particular perspective. It suggests that therapists approach clients with a view that their sense of self and identity may change over time and that what appears healthy for individuals remains embedded within that individual’s perspective and that individual’s interpretation of his/her personal history. Additionally, it suggests that personal perspectives on self and mental health would demonstrate that the criteria for mental health would vary across individuals, “because there can be for Nietzsche no single normal development of the human psyche” (Wales & Helshon, 1999, p. 177). Also, of course, it requires that therapists have clear awareness of their own perspectives and how they operate when approaching their clients.

In summing Nietzsche’s approach from our constructivist perspective we once again see numerous convivial themes: we have no way of knowing an ultimate truth or objective external criteria for truth, and so we create our understanding and beliefs to impose order and structure on our phenomenal experience. By creating that structure we create knowledge and conventional truth, recognizing alternative perspectives and their potential utility. To the extent that we have the opportunity to test our alternative perspectives we have the opportunity to create more effective and valuable, life-affirming and expanding models, even while we recognize them as fictions. We can see Nietzsche’s perspectivism as clearing away arguments for final, absolute truths that stand in the way of human transformation: “Nietzsche maintains that cultivating a flourishing life is in the end what creates humans who justify humanity and who prepare the ground for those who overcome humanity altogether…When humanity is overcome entirely, the inhabitants of the new world will be perspectivists” (Hales & Welshon, 2000, p. 203).

William James’ Pragmatism

Historically moving forward a few decades, into the beginning of 20th Century C.E., and from Europe to the United States, we next consider the Pragmatism of William James, the “father” of American psychology. In an excellent and thorough analysis of James’ reconstruction of philosophy, Siegfried (1990) describes how Nietzsche and James had both responded to the effects of Darwin’s theory and its “overthrow of the rationally ordered world that bound together Western thinkers from Aristotle to Newton” (p. 258) and which, I might add, represented a foundationalist view. James experienced a personal crisis and found himself struggling with his attempts to overcome nihilism, failing to “grasp Nietzsche’s insight that nihilism arises from the despair we feel when...
religious or other grounds for an already ordered world are shown not to be the case” (Siegfried, 1990, p. 258). Nietzsche showed how we could overcome this despair by realizing that such an objective order never existed in the first place, and that we humans had created the religious, social, and scientific orders that we had lived by. Siegfried describes how James’ development of Pragmatism eventually offered “an alternative to nihilism by first denying the independent rationality of the world and then showing how its secondarily rational character is brought about through our cooperative efforts” (1990, p. 259), consistent with the views of Social Constructionism and Radical Constructivism. Building on them as well as Nietzsche, we will also see James’ emphasis on the role of human activity expanding the possibilities of bringing about a world as we might imagine we want, within the constraints of actual experience.

Although James struggled with nihilism and attempted to find a middle ground to give meaning in a random world, his main project in proposing Pragmatism focused on finding a middle ground between the extremes of rationalism and empiricism, and he sought a way to use their best strengths and avoid their weaknesses. Empiricism has the strength of attending to facts, and rationalism supports human values and ideas, both of which seem important and necessary to human functioning. However, James devoted more attention to the problems of rationalism, which he saw as focusing excessively on words, a priori reasons, principles, absolutes, dogma, and finality. Rationalist approaches attempt to externalize the common-sense categories by treating them very technically and articulately. A ‘thing’…is a subject in which qualities ‘inhere.’ A subject is a substance. Substances are of kinds, and kinds are definite in number, and discrete. These distinctions are fundamental and eternal. As terms of discourse they are indeed magnificently useful, but what they mean, apart from their use in steering our discourse to profitable issues, does not appear (James, 1963, p. 81).

James saw the essential difference between pragmatism and rationalism as that rationalist perspectives view reality as fully finished, completed, and permanent, while his pragmatism viewed it as still in process and awaiting completion in a distant future, a perspective closely aligned with Kelly’s view. While rationalism sees the universe as secure, the pragmatist sees it as “still pursuing its adventures” (James, 1963, p. 113). James came to see rationalism’s “…metaphysical quest for final answers that would end all inquiries … as a remnant of a primitive belief in magic words that can unriddle the universe (Seigfried, 1990, p. 244).” Siegfried points out that rationalists object to James’ pragmatism based on their idea that the world must be orderly on its own, and she reinforces pragmatism’s conviviality with several familiar constructivist notions, by stating that rationalists disregard the fact that they are not just reporting on a world which is simply found, but are themselves organizing a world which will answer to their subjective demands. … Such rationalist demands are shown to be themselves exercises in wish-fulfillment, since so much of the phenomenally experienced world must be denied in order to satisfy their conditions. … By contrast, the pragmatist, while recognizing such wish-fulfillment as one condition for the appropriation of a meaningful world, does not make it the only one. Both the demands of others and the
recalcitrance of experienced facts prevent us from reconstructing the world solely according to our demands. We do help to bring about the world which we seek to understand and live in; we neither simply passively reflect it in our interpretive schemas nor do we simply remold it, without remainder, into patterns of our own choosing (Seigfried, 1990, p. 251).

James (1963) put forth his explication of Pragmatism in a series of lectures given more than 100 years ago, in late 1906 and early 1907. Consistent with Nietzsche’s notion that people’s philosophical positions represent their personal perspectives and predilections, James suggests that people tended to embrace rationalism or empiricism as a function of their personal temperament, the Rationalist as “Tender-Minded” and the Empiricist as “Tough-Minded.” He proposed Pragmatism as a method that preserves a cordial relationship with both empirical facts and rationalist constructions by tracing the practical consequences of propositions. We can gain clarity about a belief or idea related to a phenomenal “object” by considering the practical effects that the idea might have, what consequences we might experience. “There can be no difference anywhere that doesn’t make a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen” (James, 1963, p. 25).

James saw pragmatism as a method only, not focused on any particular result and not yielding final answers that will end the quest. “Theories … become instruments, not answers to enigmas in which we can rest (James, 1963, p. 26).” He contrasted his approach with foundationalist perspectives, with which he personally struggled, noting that when humans first discovered scientific laws, people “believed themselves to have deciphered authentically the eternal thoughts of the Almighty (James, 1963, p.27).” Like the perspectives we have considered above, he came to view laws as approximations, and to see theory, not as an absolute transcript of objective reality, but as something potentially. He regarded theories as a language made by humans and shorthand way of communicating, as “mental modes of adaptation to reality, rather than revelations or gnostic answers to some divinely instituted world-enigma” (James, 1963, p. 85-86).

**Truth as Action and Process**

What does “truth” mean, or consist of, for the Pragmatist? “(T)rust in our ideas and beliefs means … that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience…” (James, 1963, p. 28, italics in original). Pragmatism says, suppose we take “an idea or believe to be true (James, 1963, p. 88)”, what difference will it make? “The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not (James, 1963, p. 88-89).” We can then view an idea as “… ‘useful because it is true’ or that ‘it is true because it is useful.’ Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that here is an idea that gets fulfilled and can be verified” (James, 1963, p. 90) because one phenomenal experience leads to other experiences that appear meaningful and worthwhile. Knowledge and truth thus relate to concrete facts in specific cases. We judge knowledge as true or false depending on whether it accords with our existing beliefs, and we judge another’s ideas based on whether they make sense to us.
James viewed “truth” as a name for the process we use to verify ideas as experienced, and drew a parallel with other terms ending in “th” related to life-related processes that humans pursue: health, wealth, strength, etc. “Truth is made, just as health, wealth and strength are made in the course of experience (James, 1963, p. 96).” We make truth in the process of our experience, rather than seeing it as something that precedes that experience, in the same way that we make wealth or health, rather than seeing them as pre-existing. “Truth…is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their agreement, as falsity means their disagreement, with reality. … True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that therefore is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known as (James, 1963, p. 135).”

The pragmatist, therefore, does not ask with what true ideas agree but what concrete difference in actual life an idea’s being true will make. The practical difference true ideas make is that they can be corroborated and verified. False ideas cannot. By an idea’s verification is meant that it leads into or towards other parts of experience, and the connections thus made or transitions undergone are found to be progressive, harmonious, and satisfactory. … Thoughts are true just insofar as they are valuable instruments of action. … Instead of passively reflecting reality or even reflecting on it or conversing about it, we help to actively bring about the reality in the very process of knowing. … Pragmatic truth is not the agreement of proposition with reality, but an expression of the anticipated or actual successful completion of a worthwhile leading (Seigfried, 1990, p. 294).

Thus, pragmatists come to see truth or falsity not as properties of theories or a relationship between thoughts and facts, but rather how ideas actually perform in specific situations (Seigfried, 1990). For James, truth is an instrument of action. Ideas we come to see as “true” lead us to practically important actions. “We label as true whatever can or has come through the verification process. We bother to engage in the process because such a habitual way of acting has been, and continues to be, useful. We would never have engaged in such actions in the first place, nor placed great value in ascertaining what we then label ‘true,’ unless they were useful in this broad sense of the enhancement of human life” (Seigfried, 1990, p. 308-309). “True thoughts are those that allow us to make advantageous connection with the particulars of experience. … The validity of cognition itself is inseparable from that final test of it which consists in some valuable result of the action which it serves to guide (Seigfried, 1990, p. 309).”

**Conventional as Common Sense**

James described as “Common Sense” the socially constructed context in which this truth process occurred, similarly to the conventional rules of the Sophists and conventional reality of the Buddhists. He viewed common sense as fundamental ways that people think about their experience and “things” in the world as developed long ago by human ancestors and maintained and preserved through time. For James, common sense refers to the “use of certain intellectual forms or categories of thought (1963, p. 75).” Common sense constructs might include: thing, same or different, kinds, minds, bodies, time, space, subjects and attributes, cause, etc. Kinds and sameness are concepts we use to overcome a world of “singulars,” where nothing occurs twice and there would
be no use for logic. This common sense notion assists us practically by thinking that things continue to exist when we do not look at them. However, echoing the Buddhist view that we attend to some aspects of phenomena as “things” based on our human needs, James said, “What shall we call a thing anyhow? It seems quite arbitrary for we carve out everything … to suit our human purposes James, 1963, p. 111.” We tend to think of a “‘thing’…as a permanent unit-subject that ‘supports’ its attributes interchangeably (James, 1963, p. 80).” We can imagine how they came about in antiquity, were verified by their fit with the facts of experience, and spread from person to person until they are built into our language and cannot think effectively in any other terms. “The common-sense categories one and all cease to represent anything in the way of being; they are but sublime tricks of human thought, our ways of escaping bewilderment in the midst of sensation’s irremediable flow (James, 1963, p. 82).” Echoing Glasersfeld’s Radical Constructivist view, we can see that “This requires understanding radical empiricism, not as a traditional metaphysical system which establishes what reality must be, but as an attempt to identify those structures of experience that characterize our being in the world (Seigfried, 1990, p. 246).”

**Generalization and Reification**

James also discussed our tendency to see our humanly constructed ideas and beliefs, in spite of ourselves, as real, universal, and permanent, within the context of how new ideas and beliefs evolve. We develop new opinions and beliefs through the process of generalization. Old opinions meet new experiences that put a strain on them, through contradiction or incompatibility. “The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives (James, 1963, p. 29).” We change beliefs as little as possible until we come up with a new idea that can mediate between the old and the new. Then we adopt the new idea as true. This formulation appears highly convivial with Gorgias’ Sophism, which emphasizes how new ideas can only evolve when they fit within the existing accepted structure, whether collective or individual. We count new opinions as true to the extent that we can assimilate the novelty into our current belief structure. “The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything (James, 1963, p. 31).”

We can also see reification at work in our tendency to re-interpret the past in terms of new ideas. We tend to see our claims about reality as represent pre-existing truth or falsity because of the similarity of phenomena (kinds, similarities, etc.) and the tendency to generalize from one ‘truth’ in the sense above to other things like it. We experience greater efficiency in living by not engaging in the verification process for every instance, and practically speaking we can validate ideas indirectly or vicariously, so if we tend already, from a rationalist perspective, to believe in an independent truth, we can easily believe that these generalizations represent a “true” truth.

“Like health and wisdom, truth denotes habitual processes that need not always be exercised in order for the classifying term to be correctly applied. … whatever truths we claim are always only tentative and are subject to subsequent experiential disconfirmation. This regulative notion of a potentially better truth to be established can legislate retroactively. This can fallaciously be taken as proving that the truth always was, even if we had earlier been mistaken. Instead, this process of re-definition and re-
confirmation in new circumstances constitutes the concrete process of making true. … Because reality means reality as experienced, both reality and truth are processes, and the truths for us can never legitimately be reified in to the truth (Seigfried, 1990, p. 296).”

Phenomena simply exist as they are, but we can form beliefs about them and those beliefs can prove true or false. Before we have formulated the basis on which we form and verify beliefs, it doesn’t make sense to suggest that there was a pre-existing relationship between “beliefs” and “reality.” What, precisely, was it that obtained? We can’t say what it was until we have labeled the “what.” Physicists talk about the same issue, whether gravity existed prior to Newton’s theory or whether E=mc² existed prior to Einstein’s formulation. It thus makes no sense to say that something that we just formulated and found to be “true” (according to our system for verifying beliefs) was always the case or always true if no one had held that idea before or hadn’t verified a similar idea. We tend, however, now that we have a new idea that we have validated, to make the statement that what we have only just now determined as true must apply to all references to the topic in the past. “This is part of the on-going reconstruction that typifies the process of making true and which is sometimes misconceived as constituting past situations rather than as revising our opinions about them (Seigfried, 1990, p. 298).” We shall say more about this issue in the conclusion.

**Pragmatism and Human Possibility**

When we come to see the rationalist, foundationalist belief that we can follow some strict method to arrive at a final truth as a figment of imagination, we can then see the constructive nature of pragmatism. We don’t lose anything by posing that ideas are tentative, rather than absolute, once we understand the impossibility of absolute ideas. We instead proceed by developing more or less satisfactory interpretations, experiencing their success or failure, comparing the utility of various alternatives, with the sense that by doing so we approach more successful and useful understanding. James’ pragmatism thus accords well with Kelly and Nietzsche in emphasizing the importance of human creativity and audacity, as manifest in our willingness to live out our alternative views of the world and pursue their implications in concrete action.

Pragmatism actively supports the sense that our ideas and beliefs can manifest in our lives through direct testing of experience and creating events that will lead to the outcome we desire, within the environmental, biological, social, and personal contexts within which we operate. “We know our acts as turning-places where we experience our creativity in regard to both ourselves and the world. … Why may not our own activity, of which we have such intimate experience, ‘be the actual turning places and growing-places which they seem to be, of the world’ (Seigfried, 1990, p. 250)?” Again echoing Nietzsche and Kelly, we can see James’ pragmatism as fully supporting human audacity and expansion. “(T)he survival and enhancement of a human form of life is the ultimate criterion of success in this transformation of chaos into order of all sorts, from material well-being to cosmological speculations…” (Seigfried, 1990, p. 257).

**Synthesis, Summary, Conclusions**

And so we have come to the end of our review of the five convivial perspectives, within the context of our three constructivist perspectives. Can we now draw any conclusions or over-arching themes from this review? Although I see this as a daunting task, it seems that my responsibility as the author requires that I make an attempt. I will
provide my sense of how I see the synthesis of these perspectives leading me to view five major topics that we began with:

• Can we know ultimate reality?
• What do we mean by truth?
• How might we relate to social convention, beliefs, and practices?
• What hazards accompany belief in Truth?
• How might we apply these ideas to human progress and liberation?

Knowing Ultimate Reality

All of the anti-foundationalist perspectives agree that, try as we might, we cannot identify an independent basis for justifying any ideas or beliefs as reflecting an independently existing reality apart from the human process of knowing. At the most immediate level, the Skeptics simply ask “how do you know your belief is true rather than opinion,” and fail to find any basis yielding a satisfactory response. Gorgias and Nagarjuna delve more deeply into the question and demonstrate the incoherence of any idea that such an independent truth might exist independently of human experience. We cannot imagine a basis by which we could identify a separate, independent perspective by which we could compare our ideas with a pre-existing reality. Any phenomenon that we attempt to identify and label exists only in a relative, dependent relation with its elements, other phenomena, and its components, and it continues to change. We cannot, therefore, identify an independently existing essence or “thing” that defined and determines the identity of the phenomenon. Any idea or belief that we can identify evolves within the context of a particular human perspective, and only has meaning within that perspective. Attempts to construct order and regularity appear to reflect our desire for regularity and order and for a predictable experience, rather than features of the world itself. Thus, we end up with a view that we cannot determine any meaningful truth about the world.

We might look carefully about where this conclusion leads us. We might find ourselves tempted to say, as some have suggested, that we have discovered that “the way that the world is is that there is no way that the world is.” This leads us to yet another incoherent view that when we say that the world has no intrinsic reality we mean that we have discovered the intrinsic nature of reality and found it extrinsic (Rorty, 1995).

What do we Mean by Truth?

Does this view imply that a real world does not exist, and that phenomena only consist of figments of our imagination? We might find it more useful to distinguish between the nature of the world and the nature of truth, and to see truth as something humans make rather than find. Rorty (1995) suggested that we might find it useful to “make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that the truth is out there” (p. 109). Making such a distinction leads us to the view that the concept of “truth” can only apply to human descriptions of phenomena or propositions regarding phenomena, but not to the world itself. “Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world is on its own—unaidered by the describing activities of human beings” (p. 109).

If we take the foundationalist view that the world has its own language, and that human knowledge corresponds to that language, we find ourselves in a muddle, arguing over who has the “correct” version of that language. Alternatively, when we attempt to determine a way to know how to justify a claim to that correct version quickly move to the antifoundationalist camp. Then we come to realize that it does not make sense to
assume that the world itself cares about the sentences that we use, or the verbal labels we
give to phenomena, or that the world views some explanations as better than others. If
we view the world as indifferent to how we describe it then we can look more carefully at
how we create our descriptions rather than whether they reflect an independent reality,
and how we humans come to view some explanations as better than others. If we
understand truth as something that only exists within a vocabulary, rather than in
independent criteria, we will clearly recognize that we humans invented vocabularies and
look to see how we use those vocabularies for human ends. We might find it more useful
to human purposes not to use the concept of “intrinsic nature,” a view that Nagarjuna’s
perspective would fully support, because the idea creates more difficulties, socially and
personally, than benefit. “To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there
waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, our there, there is no
truth” (Rorty, 1995, p. 111). Instead it suggests that we could more effectively serve
human purpose to, as Seng-tsan (Kornfield, 1996) suggested, stop searching for truth and
cherishing opinions.

Once we have liberated ourselves from seeing the search for Truth as useful or
meaningful, we can perhaps more profitably examine how the human process of creating
truth works and how we can put it work to serve human needs. Once we make that turn
of view, we can immediately see the value of seeing “truth” as a prize awarded for the
most persuasive idea, particularly to the extent that the idea leads directly to verification
through its correlation with other direct experiences. The Sophist, Pragmatist, and Social
Constructionist perspectives then provides ample explication of how we humans engage
in processes of making truth from a conventional, relative sense, and how we use those
truths to further human goals. We can quickly recognize that human vocabulary comes
from within a cultural context, and see the relative, dependent, impermanent, and hence
empty nature of words and beliefs, while at the same time recognizing their utility as
ways to make useful predictions and coordinate human activity.

**Participating in Conventional Reality**

Like the Skeptics, we can participate fully in the conventional social reality as
represented by human-invented words, concepts, practices, etc., and managed by
members of the community, without the compunction to regard them as reflecting
something “real.” We can see the practical value of social conventions, and socially
defined notions of “good” and “bad” behaviors and events, without having the need to
view “good” and “evil” inherent qualities of the events. Because of the environmental,
biological, and social constraints that have shaped this relative, conventional reality, and
because of the compelling nature of conditioning, our conventional behavior will be
strong and consistent.

**Combating Reification**

But because we operate so fully within the context of the socially-constructed
world, and its socially-constructed vocabulary, because we prefer predictability over
chaos, we will find the tendency to treat this socially constructed reality “as if” it
reflected and represented an ultimate truth about the world. We then come to believe that
events and experiences we label as “good” or “bad” reflect actual qualities in the events
rather than our invented interpretations, and we come to see the worldview or perspective
of our particular social conditioning as ultimate and inherently correct and “right,” and
thus other viewpoints as inherently “wrong.” We find ourselves dissatisfied, in conflict, and we suffer.

**Cherishing Diverse Perspectives**

When we recognize the invented nature of our reality we will ultimately, perhaps regretfully, have to accept the existence of multiple perspectives and realize that we can find no independent basis for justifying any of them as “correct” or “true.” We will have to accept that truth value of perspectives as in their persuasive power and in their ability to lead to useful predictions that enhance and expand human effectiveness and satisfaction. When we view truth as a way of assessing and verifying the usefulness of various points of view, ideas, and beliefs to human fulfillment, rather than reflecting an external criterion, we will, as Nietzsche suggested, come to relish and revel in audacious (Kelly) human creativity and to cherish the variety of perspectives that humans can invent.
References


