

[DOI: 10.20472/IAC.2015.018.064](https://doi.org/10.20472/IAC.2015.018.064)

PAUL KINGSLEY

University of Liverpool / Laureate Online Education, United Kingdom

ORWELL'S 1984 AND THE DANGERS OF CONSTRUCTING THE WORLD

Abstract:

Educational constructivists maintain that knowledge is constructed by students as they learn. Sometimes this involves a weakening of the epistemological claim that knowledge involves discovering facts about an independent reality. In the terminology of Immanuel Kant, we are claimed to have access to phenomena or appearances, but not to things in themselves. This approach is closely linked to Husserl's belief that objects must be "for" some consciousness, and the early Wittgenstein's view that the self is not part of the world. All of these views place a great deal of emphasis on the notion of a disembodied consciousness that somehow constructs the world it perceives. They tend to weaken our belief in an independent world about which we can have objective knowledge. Is this a mere philosophical quibble of no practical importance? Does it really matter?

George Orwell, in his novel, 1984, introduces his unlikely hero, Winston Smith. He asks the question, "If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind itself is controllable what then?" Smith's tormentor, O'Brien, eventually supplies the answer. "But I tell you, Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes: only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever the Party holds to be the truth, is truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party." In short, the state engages in fabrications which are an extreme form of knowledge construction. Just once, Smith held in his hand absolute proof that the state had lied. He comes to see this mind-independent evidential challenge as the most radical kind of threat to a totalitarian state. Orwell outlines a situation where the distinction between constructing and discovering knowledge does matter. If important issues are at stake, we must take the greatest care before making claims that our knowledge is constructed. I shall argue that Kant, Husserl, and Wittgenstein conducted thought experiments with flawed research designs.

Keywords:

constructivism, Orwell, 1984, Kant, non Glaserfeld, truth, realism, Husserl, Peirce, Ingarden

JEL Classification: I29