

REFLECTIONS ON NELSON GOODMAN'S CONCEPT OF WORLDMAKING

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1. Introduction:

Philosophers are always wondering how we perceive reality? How do we acquire knowledge? What is the knowledge-generation process? These questions always come to our mind when we encounter the world and try to understand how we make sense of the complexity of the world. Nelson Goodman (1906-1998), an important 20th-century American philosopher, provides fascinating ideas about the worldmaking process in his *The Ways of Worldmaking* following a constructivist approach. To understand the world, and the worldmaking process, he proposes his concept 'Irrealism'. He defines Irrealism as:

Irrealism does not hold that everything or even anything is unreal, but sees the world melting into versions and versions making worlds (1984, p.29).

To understand Goodman's constructivist approach, we need to first examine what he means by world versions. If we analyse Goodman's statement that "what there are consists of what we make", then it would be easy for us to understand his philosophy. Goodman mentions that there is no single right way to describe the world. There are many ways constructed differently, according to the categories used by an observer. We use several systems to understand the world's experience. Goodman talks about the multiplicity of worlds, which we make through various uses of several symbol systems. Different symbol systems provide various conflicting descriptions of the world. In one description, the earth moves, on the other, it does not, and so on. They picture /interpret the world in multiple ways. Whenever we ask someone about the world, he or she will

describe the world to us by employing categories providing a version or versions. But how is the world separated from these frames of reference? This needs explanation.

2. Process of Worldmaking:

Goodman not only says that there are world versions, rather he goes beyond by saying that the world is made by making such versions. Goodman mentions that all we can grasp are the world versions, we are limited in the way we describe, and our universe consists of these ways. In his words, “world dissolves into versions”. That is why he claims that worldmaking begins with one version and ends with another. He mentions several methods which we use for making worlds from the existing world.

(i) **Composition and decomposition:** Worldmaking consists of the method of composition and decomposition. That means we divide the world into several parts and then compose the parts into the whole.

(ii) **Ordering:** We order the world into different entities. The world versions are not different, but we introduce differences that depend on our particular frames of reference. Goodman states:

As nothing is at rest or is in motion apart from a frame of reference, so nothing is primitive or is derivationally prior to anything apart from a constructional system (Goodman,1978, p. 12).

(iii) **Deletion and supplementation:** Worldmaking involves a deletion and supplementation process, and extensive weeding out and filling. We remove the material which we do not need and we add new material according to our needs.

(iv) **Deformation:** When we make our world in the above process, we sometimes actually destroy as well as distort its original form. These are the processes through which we make the world. Now the question is: how does he make sense of the world and its versions? Is worldmaking simply the making of versions?

3. Relation between the world and its versions:

According to Goodman, the world consists of versions, i.e., we describe the world through versions, and apart from these versions, we cannot say anything about the world. We differ in our versions because description is informed by interest, experiences, own insights, and circumstances, but without versions, we cannot grasp the world.

The activity of knowing involves the processing of raw material into a finished product, and we are involved in this process. Goodman says, “We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described” (1978, p.3). Goodman never speaks about a version-independent world, because we don’t know what the world is like apart from these versions. The world is always understood by some representation. The world we talk about and act in cannot be understood independently of the versions.

Goodman does not directly speak about version transcending world or the noumenal world like Kant because he believes that we cannot find any feature about the mind-independent world, whatever we talk about the world, whatever we acknowledge about the world is only relative to language and symbols which we use. If we abandon all the versions, then it will not be possible for us to say anything about the world. He says that there is no readymade world. We categorize and unite things as world versions. In carving up the world, we make the world by making versions. Goodman states:

To say that every right version is a world and to say that every right version has a world answering to it may be equally right even if they are at odds with each other. Moreover, talk of worlds and talk of right versions are often interchangeable (1996, p.144).

It seems implausible to claim that worlds are similar to versions. Goodman uses ‘right versions’ and ‘worlds’ interchangeably. Concerning these issues, Israel Scheffler (2001) points out Goodman’s ambiguity about the ‘World’. He says Goodman uses this expression sometimes from a versional interpretation and sometimes from an objectual interpretation. Objectual interpretation is expressed when Goodman says:

The many stuffs—matter, energy, waves, phenomena – that worlds are made of ... (1978, p.6).

Goodman did not distinguish these two because he believed that they are intertwined with each other. Worlds are made along with the versions, that's why he claimed the world dissolves into versions. Here one worry is that if the features of the world are generated by the versions, what are they imposed upon? Goodman says:

The world of a true version is a construct; the features are not conferred upon something independent of the version but combined with one another to make the world of that version (Goodman,1984, p.34).

Goodman recognizes the difference between these two, as he states,

The world is not the version itself; the version may have features—such as being in English or consisting of words —that its world does not. But the world depends upon the version (1984, p.34).

However, we cannot demarcate the line between the world and versions. Not all versions make the world; to Goodman, only the right versions do. What makes a version right is discussed in section 5 below. One may argue that just because we cannot describe the world without such descriptions, it does not mean that the 'world' is non-existent or non-important. Goodman claims that we have no options other than to fall back on the versions to know the world. What will remain if we dismantle all the versions? The world will evaporate under such analysis. The world does not exist independently of the versions. He uses worlds as versional and objectual just to emphasize the point that we can never say anything about the world without such versions. Goodman states:

We cannot find any world-feature independent of all versions. Whatever can be said truly of a world is dependent on the saying – not that whatever we say is true but that whatever we say truly (or otherwise present rightly) is nevertheless informed by and relative to the language or other symbol system we use. No firm line can be drawn between world-features that are discourse-dependent and those that are not. As I have said, "In practice, of course, we draw the line wherever we like, and change it as often as suits our purposes". If I take advantage of the privilege to speak sometimes as if there are only versions and other times as if there are worlds for all right versions, I often do it just to emphasize that point (1984, p.41).

4. Sense of ‘Making’:

Worldmaking is neither the creation of a world nor a description of a readymade world. Goodman explained it with the help of a constellation and a big dipper. Things come into being and constellation is possible only when we select things in a certain way. He stated:

We make a star as we make a constellation, by putting its parts together and marking off its boundaries...., we do not make stars as we make bricks; not all making is a matter of molding mud. The worldmaking mainly in question here is making not with hands but with minds, or rather with languages or other symbol systems...., we make versions, and right versions make worlds (1984, p.42).

The constellation is not already present there for Goodman: “Constellation becomes such only through being chosen from among all configurations” (1984, p.36). He never claims that we create the world as we create a table, chair, etc. That making is different.

Some truths conflict. In one description, it is claimed that the ‘Earth’ moves, in the other, it does not. But this does not mean that there are many Earths floating around at the same time. Goodman says,

Worlds are distinguished by the conflict or irreconcilability of their versions; and any ordering among them is other than Spatio-temporal....,there may be many stars, many planets, many chairs, many things, many events; and truths about them may conflict and contrast in all sorts of ways. But “world” is all-inclusive, covers all there is (1984, p.31-32).

If we consider conflicting truths are because of the biases of the versions, subjective preferences being involved in its formation, will we get the truth beneath the right versions? Goodman says, if we omit all the versions as artificial, the truth will no longer conflict. There will be nothing left because the World will evaporate. We always choose a version for our purposes. When we do that, the world presumably becomes that.

Goodman's statements like, — 'there is no unique right version or world', 'versions make worlds', and 'There is no ready-made world waiting to be labeled' — give an impression that his philosophy is an extreme form of idealism, which he denies. Like Idealists, Goodman does not claim that we make this world from nothing i.e. *ex nihilo*. We are always inculcated with various world versions. Nobody comes into the world with an empty hand. There is always a world already in our hands. The making is re-making. We construct the version out of the versions we already have. Goodman states, "In system building, we never start from scratch" (1988, p. 12). We start with some notions and beliefs about the object at the beginning of a particular cognitive enterprise. Goodman also says there are many worlds, and these worlds are actual worlds, not merely possible or imaginary worlds. It does not mean that the mind creates its own object. He says:

I have not said that there are no worlds, but only that conflicting right versions are of different worlds if any. My nihilism and my pluralism are complementarily conditional; and that, I submit, has more the flavor of irrealism than of idealism (1996, p. 204).

He does not make any confession about something which underlies the versions, some deep structure, which itself is not a version. Philosophers may ask, what is the cause or foundation behind the construction of the world? For Goodman, this talk makes little sense. Whenever we talk about something, we impose certain structures, properties, and concepts. Without this, there is nothing to say, content vanishes without its form. Goodman agrees with Kant here, that things come into experiences when we order that unstructured empirical data in a certain way. As Kant says, a concept without percepts is empty. Goodman says we can only talk about the world as a construction. He states: "Talk of unstructured content or an unconceptualized given or a substratum without properties is self-defeating" (1978, p.6). The reason behind Goodman's thought is that he proposes some kind of theory-ladenness of observation. He opposes the fundamentalist account of facts, which claims that facts are found, not made. Goodman suggests we are involved in a fundamental sort of activity, namely 'making'. According to him, the Constructional world and fact are intertwined with each other. By creating

the world, we create the fact as well. Xavier de Donato- Rodriguez in his paper 'Construction and "Worldmaking": The Significance of Nelson Goodman's Pluralism'(2009) states that for Goodman:

Perception is always conceptual and "facts" are not neutrally given, but they depend from a particular frame or have to be understood as a construction of a certain theory, Facts are "fabricated" (2009, p.216).

Plausibility of the Correspondence theory of truth requires comparison with naked reality, which is implausible. The standard of truth is itself questionable. Goodman is against the correspondence theory of truth. If there was any such version-independent truth, and if we could find that, that would be the sufficient criterion for truth, but it is not possible. Goodman states that we cannot compare a version with the unstructured content or the world itself. Rather, we compare it to the version of the world that experience is presenting to us. There is no bare fact. We find a similar view in the writing of Otto Neurath and Carl Hempel. They state:

For there is...no pure, unmediated consciousness of external objects or facts as they are in themselves, independently of our ways of conceptualizing them. Therefore, we cannot compare our statements and beliefs-our linguistic and nonlinguistic representations—with the world itself in order to see whether they agree or correspond with it (2009,p, 176-177).

So the comparison between these two ultimately leads to a comparison of versions to other versions, not with the world itself.

Goodman refers to his philosophy as "radical relativism". He specifies that his relativism is under rigorous restraints. Of course, his pluralistic view ultimately leads to relativism. But Goodman's pluralism avoids such kind of relativism which takes all views to be equally true. He is not saying that all systems are equally worthwhile. Relativism defines our view of particular phenomena as depending on language, cultures, and belief systems. That means it is relative to the framework. Justification depends on an epistemic system. There is no absolute principle based on which justification can be done. This ultimately justifies the doctrine of equal validity of ways of knowing the world. Goodman

claims that we construct the world from within a certain system. There are many approaches based on which this construction of the world happens. These are valid for certain purposes, practices, and means. However, unlike relativists, his pluralism does not suggest that all versions are true. Pluralism does not require a commitment to relativism. Relativism is assumed to emphasize equal validity claims. Pluralism indicates that there may be more than one correct framework that we can use, which provides contextualized normative resources. Which is in between monism and relativism by rejecting the principles of ‘anything goes’ (anything is acceptable). He states his relativism is “equidistant from intransigent absolutism and unlimited license” (1984, pp.40).

5. Goodman’s Pluralism and the Criteria of Rightness:

How do we make sense of Goodman’s pluralism? To make sense of his pluralism, we have to understand his relativism. Goodman’s relativism shows each version is right under a given system or framework. Let us consider the two statements: (i) The earth always stands still, and (ii) The earth dances in the role of Petrouchka. These two statements conflict with each other. Now if we say (iii) In the Ptolemaic system, the earth always stands still, and (iv) In a certain Stravinsky-Fokine- system, the earth dances in the role of Petrouchka, then they do not conflict, and are compatible. These statements (i, and ii) say nothing about the earth’s motion or how the earth behaves. But when we see it through a certain framework or version, then we can consider these versions as right and wrong. So the truth values of these statements are true and false under a certain context or frame of reference. Goodman writes:

“I am convinced (...) that there is no one correct way of describing or picturing or perceiving ‘the world’, but rather that there are many equally right but conflicting ways — and thus, in effect, many actual worlds” (1984, p. 14).

There are lots of ways how the world is. Every version interprets the world in various ways. Goodman suggests relativity of all versions. He says: “The dramatically contrasting versions of the world can of course be relativized: each is right under a given

system-for a given science, a given artist, or a given perceiver and situation” (1978, p. 3). One may be asked that, when we claim that the earth moves and that it does not, this appears like a contradiction; both versions cannot be true of the same world. But Goodman is aware of this problem, and he talks about the different frames of reference and multiplicity of worlds. He says:

How, then. Are we accommodate conflicting truths without sacrificing the difference between truth and falsity? Perhaps by treating these versions as true in different worlds. Versions not applying in the same world no longer conflict; contradiction is avoided by segregation. A true version is true in some worlds, a false version in none, thus multiple worlds of conflicting true versions are actual worlds, not the merely possible worlds or nonworlds of false versions. So if there are any actual worlds, there are many (2003, p.35).

His relativism does not lead to a negation of normativity. When Goodman says the world consists of these versions, does it lead to the principle of ‘anything goes? One may say that any version is as right as any other. But this is not the case. His relativism does not suggest the principle of anything goes like anarchist philosophers. Many critics argue that Goodman’s position as a relativist is skeptical, but Nader N. Choker in his paper, ‘Nelson Goodman on Truth, Relativism, and Criteria of Rightness: Or Why We Should Dispense with Truth and Adopt Rightness?’ shows how Goodman’s relativism sounds similar to post-modernism, but it also provides a meaningful and objective criterion for evaluation because it is rigorously constrained by the criteria of rightness. He does not provide the sceptical and negative conclusion that the postmodernist thinkers do. Goodman clearly explains that there are conflicting true or right versions but this does not show that there is a mess between truth and falsity. As Goodman says:

Willingness to accept countless alternative true or right world-versions does not mean that everything goes, that tall stories are as good as short ones, that truths are no longer distinguished from falsehood (1978, p. 94).

When Goodman says that versions make the world, he is not simply saying that all versions make up the world; rather, he says the right version makes up the world. We

cannot make the world in any way we want forsaking the concern for truth and falsity. However, Goodman prefers to use the word 'right' and 'wrong' instead of true and false. He questions what constitutes truth? He sees the conception of truth in the sense of ultimate acceptability, which we can never reach out to. For him, truth is neither necessary nor sufficient criteria for version choice. He states: "Some truths are trivial, irrelevant, unintelligible, or redundant; too broad, too narrow, too boring, too bizarre, too complicated" (1978, p.120-121). For the acceptability of conflicting versions instead of truth, he gives the criteria of 'rightness'. It is not that by manipulating symbols we can make the world whatever way we please. Goodman's world versions are not a product of human agency nor do they depend on one's individual opinion, but are selected from a long experience of training in knowledge. To make the world, they must meet the criteria of rightness. So what are those criteria or constraints based on which we make the worlds? They must be internally coherent, practically coherent, must achieve goals, must have an intelligible purpose, fit with intuitive judgment, and be simple. Criteria of 'Rightness' includes certain purposes, practices, and means [utility, consistency, coherence, credibility, comprehension, scope, simplicity, serviceability, effect, relevance, appropriateness, entrenchment, and pragmatic consideration]. For version acceptability, these criteria are taken into consideration. If the version meets the criteria, then it is accepted as right. Being right does not mean that we accept it as a complete certainty, but only consider its durability for some purposes or in some respects. There is no reason to think of truth and rightness as eternal. Goodman does not talk about ultimate acceptability because acceptability is transient. After all, it may turn wrong at a later time. To make the right version, we have to start from somewhere, but it does not mean we start from careless guesses. We cannot establish anything for sure. Although confidence and convictions must be there, Goodman believes that there are no absolute certainties.

Here one worry would be, what happens when we encounter equally well-qualified versions if they conflict with one another? In that case, the decision goes with that version which has better entrenchment predicates, which enables us to make efficient

use of available cognitive resources and habits of thought. He explains his criteria of rightness in terms of the 'notion of fit'. He states: "Rightness of descriptions, representations, exemplifications, expressions...is primarily a matter of fit: fit to what is referred to in one way or another, or to other renderings, or to modes and manners of organization" (1978, p.138). So for Goodman, rightness is a matter of fit with practice. There is no reason to think that the criteria of rightness are arbitrary since consistency, fidelity to antecedent practice, the satisfaction of our goals, and adequacy to the purposes are all considered. He mentions that we do not make versions arbitrarily nor from scratch; instead, we proceed always with an already adopted background, apparatus, or structure, containing elements with varying degrees of initial credibility. He imposes rigorous restraints in terms of the criteria of rightness on his relativism, so we can say his relativism does not follow the principle of 'anything goes'.

Goodman mentions that there are many valid descriptions of the world. These arise from two causes. First, there is an influence of culture, habit, and theory on perception; second, it is impossible to draw a line between the character of the experience and the description which is given by the subject. Goodman in his paper 'The Way the World is' (1960) mentions:

Science, Language, Perception, Philosophy-none of these can ever be utterly faithful to the world as it is. All make abstractions or conventionalizations of one kind or another, all filter the world through the mind, through concepts, through the senses, through language; and all these filtering media in some way distort the world. It is not just that each gives only a partial truth, but that each introduces distortion of its own. We never achieve even in part a really faithful portrayal of the way the world is (1960p.49).

We do not know what the world is like, but we can give some reflection on how the world is by examining the way it is given to us in experience. Goodman's main concern is not what is given, but how something is given. With picturing the world, there are various ways of seeing it, but none of the ways can claim certainty. For Goodman, there are some useful ways to see the world. The pursuit of an ontology of the world is a pointless endeavour to Goodman. The metaphysical questions regarding 'reality' are

also pointless. According to Goodman: “Ontological claims have truth value only relative to a ‘construal of’ or ‘way of taking’ objects, the world, reality, etc” (1951, p. xxvi). Goodman (1960) emphasizes how the world is given to us and mentions the conflicting ways of seeing the world. He states: “If I were asked what is the food for men, I should have to answer “none”. For there are many foods. And if I am asked what is the way the world is, I must likewise answer, “none.” For the world is many ways” (1960, p. 55). However, in his book *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), he talks about multiple actual worlds, which seems to contradict our common-sense view that there is one world. Goodman states:

As intimated by William James’s equivocal title *A Pluralistic Universe*, the issue between monism and pluralism tends to evaporate under analysis. If there is but one world, it embraces a multiplicity of contrasting aspects; if there are many worlds, the collection of them all is one. The one world may be taken as many or the many worlds taken as one; whether one or many depends on the way of taking (1978, p.2).

Although he does not give importance to the idea of reduction, Goodman thinks:

A reduction from one system to another can make a genuine contribution to understanding the interrelationships among world-versions; but reduction in any reasonably strict sense is rare, almost always partial (1978, p.5).

Goodman does not claim that all the right versions represent “the world”, as he is opposed to the idea of a common base. So, for him, there are many actual worlds. His view differs from the mystic position, which claims that there is a way the world is but that way cannot be captured by any descriptions. Goodman thinks that there is no one way the world is, and that’s why no representation can capture the world as it is. Rather, there are many ways the world is. The question of “the real” or unconceptualized reality is senseless to Goodman because it itself results from construction and interpretation. We need to keep in mind that, when he talks about theory or version comparison, he does not mean comparing things with unconceptualized given, but a comparison of a version with other versions in context. The reason behind not agreeing with a metaphysical realist is that the metaphysical notion of ‘truth’ does not play any role in

the understanding of our theories. Nothing can be said about that reality. Donato-Rodriguez explains (2009), according to Goodman, “The universe as-it-really-is” is not accessible to us; the only things accessible to us are collections of data (that cannot be neutrally given) as interpreted in one or another way (2009, p.217). Goodman’s overall stand depends on the pragmatic ground, which includes our practices, goals, and purposes, and is based on the criteria of rightness.

I have shown how we make sense of his relativism which is constrained by the criteria of rightness. I outline his idea of worldmaking which makes clearer his pluralistic thesis.

6. Conclusion:

If we analyze Goodman’s philosophy, we notice two alternatives, either there is no versionless world or we cannot grasp it. I think it is permissible to claim we cannot have a versionless world instead of a non-existent versionless world. We cannot claim that there is no Grand Canyon or electron unless we create it. Although Goodman recognizes a difference between world and versions, as he said that versions consist of words but the world does not. In spite of that, Goodman does not want to make any rigid demarcation between ‘the world as it is’ and ‘the human construction of it’. Because there is no uncontaminated view, human activity is always involved there. We categorize things in our ways, which depend upon versions. If reality is classified by versions, is there a neutral reality at all? He states:

The world...is a world without kinds or order or motion or rest or pattern—a world not worth fighting for or against (1978, p. 20).

Ontology deals with the question, what is there? There is no satisfactory answer to this question. Disagreement is always there on this issue. Goodman’s position is an epistemic understanding of the world rather than the metaphysical. Whatever we know or whatever we acknowledge about the world is relative to the epistemological point of view. Goodman’s philosophical position replaces the notion of truth with viability within the experiential world, which shifts the focus to usefulness from that of the metaphysical. In this manner, he avoids the ontological question about the nature of reality and proposes

a pragmatic approach that focuses on the practical aspects of practitioners' experiential world. Unlike the traditional sense of a system-neutral standpoint of evaluation, where the goal is to develop an epistemology, whose concern is to truth, Goodman's overall project is system-relative, that depends on pragmatic grounds based on the criteria of rightness. Moreover, Goodman's approach is interesting to explore as an appropriate position in the philosophy of science. Scientists proliferate different models or systems to explain the same set of phenomena, which open up new possibilities and make the research useful. We can count Goodman's pluralism as a defender of scientific modality.

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