

MICHAEL A. ARBIB and MARY B. HESSE, *The Construction of Reality*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1986, xii + 286 pp.

Reality is not constructed by the minds or language of thinking beings, but is as it is independently of endeavours to conceptualize or describe it. However, through these endeavours thinking beings do come to "construct" their "realities." That is to say, they form systems of beliefs about aspects of the world, and they do so guided by their habits of perception, their present beliefs, their styles of reasoning, and the relations of implication and connotation that develop in their vocabularies.

Some philosophers contend that since thinkers cannot stand outside their beliefs—outside their "constructed realities"—to compare them with what they are about, the quotation marks insisted on above point to no distinction we can understand. Thus they opt for a relativism in which the objects a thinker can know are, through the application of concepts to an ineffable raw material, in a literal sense constructed by that thinker's mind or language. But the inference they make rests on the thesis that beliefs are essentially mental analogies or representations of the thinker's external world, a conception of belief relativists share with foundational realists. The representationalist view of belief, though, cannot by itself enable us to understand how thinkers use their beliefs in getting around in the world; yet once the view that beliefs are complex rules for action is adopted, the question representationalism was thought to answer—what is it in general for a belief to be true or false?—is shown to be misconceived.

Arbib and Hesse's *The Construction of Reality* can be read as an attempt to fashion a vocabulary informed by this pragmatist conception of belief—a vocabulary in which issues concerning language, mind, action, and investigations into and knowledge of physical and social reality (and of divine reality) can be addressed while the realism/relativism debates are bypassed in good conscience. The book has no theme or central argument; instead it contains discussions of various topics (including free will, the mind-body problem, cognitive science's prospects, the rationality of religious belief, and the nature of morality), each conducted in terms derived from "schema theory," a nascent family of theses about cognition and intentional behaviour gathered from Arbib's and others' cognitive science research.

Some of the particular arguments Arbib and Hesse present in their discussions of these topics, however, are not as strong as they could be, and some of their specific views do not promote their cause as well as would others just as consistent with their general positions. For instance, in arguing against those who suppose metaphors are imprecise and who thus disparage the metaphorical use of language, they advance the thesis that metaphor and literalness are on a continuum, literalness being a limiting case of metaphor. Davidson's view of metaphor, though, which the authors do not consider, is both superior to theirs and would serve better than does their own view their purpose of showing that metaphors are indispensable to investigation, understanding and communication.

On the whole, though, much more is right than is wrong in what Arbib and Hesse say. Nonetheless, *The Construction of Reality* ultimately is disappointing. There are two reasons for this. First, though they wear the garb of schema theory and are often quite powerful, few of the book's arguments are unfamiliar. Second, the idiom it introduces doesn't really get us that far beyond the old debates, certainly not as far as do the realignments of vocabulary Kuhn, Davidson and Rorty have offered us. Arbib and Hesse are too often content to play relativism off against realism and then salvage bits of each. Thus inevitably some representationalist theses are recovered rather than dissolved. Only occasionally do the authors press the insight that beliefs are features of practices in ways that distance us from representationalist ideas and the debates they encourage.

MARK MERCER