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Construction & Strangification

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Construction & Strangification

The Philosophy of Friedrich Wallner

Edited by
Jan Brousek

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For my “Doktorvater” Fritz Wallner and my grandson Mathys

Dedication

The idea for this book project was born at the end of 2020, the year in which Friedrich Wallner celebrated his 75th birthday. However, neither 2020 nor the following years were characterized by major festivities. The originally planned celebrations for his golden doctoral jubilee in 2022 also fell victim to the pandemic.

Although the legal framework for celebrating festivities has at least been in place again since 2023, the global political situation still offers limited cause for joy and peace of mind. This is due to the fact that the fear of the pandemic has been overshadowed by other uncertainties, such as unrest and even wars.

These crisis-ridden years, which my generation as well as my own had been spared up until then, do not necessarily provide the basis for boundless optimism, but they do make it all the more clear how crucial it is not to rest on the laurels of previous generations, and that critical thinking, skepticism and the ability to reflect must be constantly trained. Even though thinking takes place in structures, it remains a process, a path that must be continuously followed. And this is precisely what Friedrich Wallner created with the Vienna School of Constructive Realism a basis for looking optimistically into the future. In doing so, he prepared the ground and equipped us with the tools – the “intellectual footwear” – that enables us to leave the beaten track of thinking and set foot on new, albeit strenuous or even unpleasant but more than ever necessary paths of thought. In this context, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Fritz Wallner on behalf of the contributors to this book.

Although Professor Wallner is going to celebrate his 80th birthday – on July 21, 2025 – in the year this book will have been published it is not intended to be a *Festschrift* in the conventional sense of a commemorative publication. This anthology not only aims to look back, but also, or rather, to look to the future against the backdrop of the current situation and develop new perspectives on current challenges and creating solutions.

We are therefore looking ahead and hope that this book will provide future generations with another tool in the toolbox of problem solving – and “All Life is Problem Solving” (Popper). The fact that my first grandchild, Mathys, had his first birthday in the same year as this book was published is highly symbolic to me. This book should also be dedicated to him, as a representative of the coming generations with their still unforeseeable challenges.

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First of all, I would like to thank the donator of this book project, the Science Department of the City of Vienna's Department of Culture (MA 7), for their financial support, without which this project would probably not have been realized. Although the majority of the work involved in such a project often remains unpaid or at least underpaid anyway, it still makes a big difference whether at least part of the financial costs are covered by a funding body. It also makes a difference insofar as a positive response (commitment) from a funding body is always of great symbolic importance in terms of motivation to actually take on this project. At this point, I would also like to mention that the MA 7 always responded to my questions and showed understanding for my concerns, not least the extension of the project duration.

In this context, I would like to thank all the contributors to this anthology in general. Specifically, I would like to thank them not only for their wonderful contributions, but also for their patience, as the road to completion was much longer than I had expected or hoped for. In this context, I would especially like to thank those for their patience who submitted their contributions very soon and/or almost ready for printing. For the aforementioned, the process may have seemed incomprehensibly long.

In the course of this, the jubilarian inevitably also had to be patient. However, patience was not his only contribution to this book. During the preparatory discussions with Friedrich Wallner it soon became clear that this book was not to be a mere *Festschrift*. He did not only take on the role of a *peer-reviewer*, but also wrote commentaries on individual contributions that are printed in this book, for which I would like to express my gratitude, as it represents a certain peculiarity; and is at least to some extent reminiscent of Paul Arthur Schilpp's approach. Most of all, however, I would like to thank Friedrich Wallner for giving me the opportunity to discuss the potential and actual contributions to this book in detail with him; which I consider a great gift for a philosopher – received from a great philosopher.

Sincere thanks are also due to another great philosopher, Hans Rainer Sepp, the series editor, for his willingness to include such a volume in the *Libri Nigri* series from the very beginning. If you look at the list of works published in this series (see the last pages of this book), there is no doubt that the present volume would not be in better hands in any other book series not edited by Friedrich Wallner himself. Nevertheless, or all the more so, I would like to thank Professor Sepp for the trust he has placed in me to carry out this task in an appropriate manner. Finally, I would also like to thank him for the editorial

assistance he always used to provide me on short notice – with a speed and precision that is inexplicable to me.

Further on, I want to thank my mother, Irene Megyery, a retired English teacher, who laboriously struggled with me through my attempts to translate my two contributions, which originally appeared in German, into – hopefully – generally understandable English – many thanks to you!

The greatest thanks, however, go to Lukas Nagl, whom I have counted among my friends for over a quarter of a century and who has become my best and closest friend over the last few years. Up to now, I have had many – but mainly private – projects with him. That has changed with this book project. Without him, this book would have been a pile of wildly more or less formatted manuscripts at worst, or a dilettantishly laid out book at best. Thanks to him and his tireless work over days and nights based on his extensive know-how as a graphic designer, he provided me with invaluable help – thanks a million!

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Preface

As the title suggests, this book project aims to provide a comprehensive examination of Friedrich Wallner's philosophical life's work, focusing on the *Vienna School of Constructive Realism*, which he founded (see Slunecko 1997, among others).

The main interest of this book is a method of philosophy of science that was born at the University of Vienna some 35 years ago. From 1987 until his retirement in 2010, Friedrich (G.) or Fritz Wallner was a full professor of philosophy with a special focus on the philosophy of science (epistemology) at the University of Vienna. During that time he developed the *Vienna School of Constructive Realism*, as evidenced by more than 200 articles, around 40 anthologies or editorships and a good 20 monographs.

However, Constructive Realism (CR) was not only founded geographically in Vienna, but also emerged significantly in the debate with Viennese philosophical schools of thought; namely in critical debate with – and differentiation from – the *Logical Empiricism* of the *Vienna Circle* (see Carnap 1934) on the one hand, Karl Popper's *Critical Rationalism* (see Popper 1935, 1994, see Miller 1974) on the other, as well as Paul Feyerabend's *Relativism* (see Feyerabend 1986, see Schulz 2012). Probably the most significant influence on the development of CR, however, came from Ludwig Wittgenstein's work (see Wittgenstein 1953, 1969–75). With recourse to Wittgenstein's concept of language-game, the CR succeeded in developing a Viennese constructivist school of thought that has overcome the deficits of the *Constructivisms* that had become popular in the second half of the last century (cf. Reich 2002) – such as *Radical Constructivism* or the *Bielefeld School* (see Förster 1985, Glasersfeld 1997) and *Methodological Constructivism* or the *Erlangen* or *Marburg School* (see Janich 1992, 2006; Lorenzen 1969) – and offers solutions to the resulting epistemological dilemmas (see Janich 1993, Schelberger 2012, Schulz 2014).

This epistemological position has met with lively interest in non-European and, in particular, Asian countries for decades, especially in the context of intercultural debates with culturally different knowledge systems.

Through countless text studies, conferences and lecture tours by Friedrich Wallner and his companions, this approach has been made accessible in various cultural and disciplinary contexts. The intensive cooperation with colleagues from numerous countries, especially China, Korea, India, Iran, Morocco, Brazil and Chile, not only increased Vienna's level of awareness and

high reputation in these countries, but also made the scientific achievements of this city internationally visible and thus enhanced Vienna's reputation as an international center of science. Wallner's works, especially monographs on CR, were translated from German and English into many languages: Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Japanese, Portuguese/Brazilian as well as Spanish and Urdu. In the course of awarding the Cross of Honor of the Republic of Austria for Science and Art 1st Class, the then Head of the Section for Science at the Ministry of Science logically described Professor Wallner as the person who intensively studied and interpreted Wittgenstein's work and made it famous throughout the world.

Surprisingly, Wallner's work was far less well received in Europe and the USA, i.e. the so-called "West". Although his early work on Wittgenstein in the 1980s also met with lively interest in Europe – especially in Italy (see, among others, Wallner 1983a, 1983b), the retrospectively far more significant conclusions drawn from it for the field of philosophy of science (see, among others, Wallner 1992a, 1992b, 1997, 2002, 2011; cf. Pietschmann/Wallner 1995) are still not being adequately discussed in European countries. This has been at best the case for Spain and Portugal.

In Vienna, the place of origin of CR, Wallner's concepts and methods have established themselves as an epistemological basis in individual disciplines, such as psychology and psychotherapy science in particular (see Greiner 2020, Greiner/Jandl 2015, Greiner/Jandl/Wallner 2010, Slunecko 1996), but there are many academic fields in which the potential of this philosophical school has not yet been fully recognized. This is somehow disappointing, as Friedrich Wallner shares the credo that *philosophy must become effective* with Karl Raimund Popper, to whom he maintained personal contact for many years. In this sense, this book project is meant to contribute to the visibility of the *Viennese School of Constructive Realism* and the *effectiveness* of its philosophy.

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Introduction

How to make philosophy effective or how to make one's bubble burst

Jan Brousek

„Bringen Sie Ihre Blase zum Platzen“

Alexander Van der Bellen

In his opening speech at the Salzburg Festival in July 2023, the Austrian Federal President, Alexander Van der Bellen, made it clear that we need to burst the bubbles of our thoughts, actions and activities because the decreasing acceptance of other opinions and the lack of respect for other world-views is becoming an increasing threat to liberal democracy:

“Too often we miss respectful interaction. We hardly discuss with each other anymore, we often only confirm our own opinions, and if someone disagrees with us, we hardly hear him or her because they are too far away: on the other side of the rift that runs through our society, soundproofed and protected in the bubble of social media.” (A. Van der Bellen cited in Völker 2023b, translation JB)

With the rift “that runs through our society”, Van der Bellen is referring to the question of how to deal with contradicting world-views in general, and in specific he refers to the social consequences of the pandemic and the increasingly noticeable tendencies towards political radicalization since then. By breaking open hermetic spaces of thought, or as he puts it, *bursting our bubbles*, Van der Bellen was the first to point to a strategy for how the social reconciliation process can succeed, which was grandly announced by the Austrian Federal Government at the beginning of 2023 (Völker 2023a, Seidl/Völker 2023) but has since then gradually degenerated into an empty phrase.¹ Van der Bellen

1 In this context, it should be mentioned that the Austrian Academy of Sciences published a study on the socio-political implications and effects of the pandemic that is well worth reading (see Bogner 2023). It is indeed positive that this undertaking was accompanied by a dialog process to which random samples of people from all over Austria were invited and in which 319 people actually actively were participating. However, it is a political misconception to assume that this can replace a broad-based social reconciliation process, comprehensively supported by political actors and widely disseminated by the media in order to involve broader sections of the public – in other words, an approach that would meet the requirements for an adequate reappraisal of a once-in-a-century-event. Unfortunately, all

advises us to “confuse algorithms” by “following those whose opinions perhaps don’t quite match our own” in order to “see sections of reality that we would never see otherwise” and, based on this, to “develop a common point of view” (Völker 2023b, translation JB). What Van der Bellen thus demands of people can be understood in the language of Constructive Realism (CR) as “strangification” – and therefore as the central method of CR for gaining knowledge. This book, which aims to provide an overview of Friedrich Wallner’s philosophical work, can also be seen as a guide to the implementation of Van der Bellen’s vision to *burst our bubbles*. In this sense, *bursting our bubbles* challenges us to reflect on our own thinking mode and tread new paths of thinking, which – as the result of an open-ended process – can lead to the development of new perspectives on reality.

At this point we can reconnect with the need for philosophy (of science) to become *effective*, as central concern of both Karl Raimund Popper and Friedrich Wallner. When a philosophical school of thought claims to be *effective*, the question inevitably arises as to what this means and in what different spheres of human life this should be the case. As the core concern of CR is a profoundly epistemological one, the greatest hope for *effectiveness* would probably be that CR could provide an answer to the “demarcation problem” that has remained unresolved for more than 100 years: the problem that the boundary between *knowledge* and *belief* or *science* and *pseudoscience* cannot be clearly drawn. However, CR does not so much provide an answer to the question of what science is and what it is not. It rather shows that the question in this form is misleading because the formulation of the question suggests that there could be a – *placeless* and *timeless* – universally valid answer to this question. From CR’s point of view, this is about as absurd as the idea that there would be a universally valid concept of beauty that all past, present and future inhabitants of planet Earth would share. In this sense, most of the representatives of CR would probably agree with the epistemologist Larry Laudan in so far that the demarcation problem is a problem for which there is no solution (cf. Traxler 2023). However, this does not mean to stop at this point, nor does it mean to give up the philosophy’s need to be effective.

How philosophy can become effective shall be answered in this anthology by using the example of CR. To be more precise, *being effective* in this

these important measures have not taken place by now. Another fact is that the right-wing populist party, FPÖ, has constantly been gaining votes since then. The extent to which these facts are related remain to be explored. Be that as it may but in order to return to the activities of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, from an epistemological perspective, particularly interesting are the “Vienna Theses on science-based advice for politics and society” (ÖAW/Leopoldina 2023).

context means to show how a certain philosophical position can contribute to an *improvement* in living conditions by overcoming sociocultural and/or disciplinary shortcomings. In this context, “improvement” can probably be understood most accurately in the sense of expanding the possibilities of human action. The philosophical examination of (scientific) concepts, based on CR’s inherent process of “strangification”, should not only lead to philosophical reflections. Rather should (scientific) concepts be deconstructed and reconstructed with new or at least additional facets of meaning. This is to be done by revealing the prerequisites that legitimize a certain interpretation of a specific term or concept. Referring to the concept of beauty, this would mean that we become aware of the conditions that lead to something being qualified as beautiful, i.e. the cultural or whatever kind of preconditions that lead to a consensus within a certain socio-culturally – or also disciplinary – defined group about what is beautiful and what is not. With regard to medical science, the critical examination and – if necessary – conscious adaptation of medical concepts widen the possibilities of therapeutic interventions in the event of illness and ways of maintaining health. The same is true in the context of politics: such an endeavor enables a far more critical and context-sensitive examination of political positions and their causes as well as implications for peaceful coexistence.

This points to the fact that the problem of demarcation within philosophy of science is not just a problem in the philosophical ivory tower. The case of the pandemic has even shown that the question of how to draw the line between science and non-science or between *knowledge* and *belief* is one with serious socio-political explosive force. Therefore, a (scientific) structure of thought is needed that avoids both cultural relativism and universalism, in the sense of a return to supposedly *supra-culturally* valid concepts. A way is needed to raise general awareness of the fact that science and scientific findings can claim to be binding even if they are not valid without restriction in every context. In other words: even if scientific theses are not valid in all possible worlds, they can still claim commitment. Science is a human construct and is therefore no more *placeless* and *timeless* than human beings can be *placeless* and *timeless*. However, this does not mean that scientific theses get “scientifically” less *credible*, quite the opposite: according to CR ensuring “scientificity” or *scientific credibility* means to gain scientific knowledge in the sense of becoming aware of the limits of the validity of certain systems of propositions.

In this context it is enlightening to refer to the so-called *problem of universals*, which has been discussed since the beginning of philosophical thinking. With the development of philosophical-constructivist positions, at least

the dogmatic idea of *universals* and universally valid interpretation of scientific “findings” was thought to have collapsed. Yet somehow, dogmatic thinking and the desire for *universals* seem to crop up again and again, at least against the backdrop of European culture and the socio-political challenges currently facing Western societies. In this regard, the phenomenon of political radicalization can be seen as political manifestations of supposedly needed *universals* or ultimate universally valid truths in order to make political positions appear binding in the sense of providing commitment. Consequently, the widely known polemical statement by the famous physicist and Nobel Prize winner Richard Feynman that philosophy of science is as important for the sciences as the scientific discipline of ornithology is for birds (see Trubody 2016) proves to be as pointed as it is wrong. The absence of epistemological reflections either leads to an absolutistic interpretation of scientific “knowledge” or to a relativist one, which is implicitly absolutistic as well (cf. Brousek 2017, 2020a, 2020b). Science cannot stand for creating knowledge without a critical (re-)appraisal of the meaning of science and its claim to truth as well as the scope of its findings.

In this respect, science needs philosophy of science in order to make its “findings” understandable as such. Otherwise even scientific findings can take on the character of arbitrariness. In extreme cases, they can even become “meaningless”, as the poor political performance in the course of the coronavirus-crisis in many countries, not least in Austria, has shown. Quite a few of the measures taken at the time to contain the pandemic were “understandably” not (or no longer) supported by the population due to their incomprehensibility.² In this context, we have experienced that the combination of epistemological reductionism on the one hand and dilettantishly argued political action on the other hand is an optimal breeding ground for political radicalization (cf. Brousek 2020a ; Brousek/Wallner 2018).

2 The self-critical reappraisal of the biggest mistakes and failures on the part of politicians and the media, which is at least to some extent taking place five years after the outbreak of the pandemic, clearly points in this direction. See respectively “listen” to the radio programs “Das Virus und die Medien” (“The virus and the media”) by Stefan Kappacher and Viktoria Waldegger (2025) as well as “Wie die Pandemie unser Leben veränderte” (“How the pandemic changed our lives”) by Monika Feldner-Zimmermann (2025), both broadcasted by the public Austrian radio station Ö1, which is regarded as Austria’s “cultural channel”. See also the newspaper commentaries (“Kommentare der Anderen”) by Martin Sprenger (2025) and Klaus Kraemer (2025) in the Austrian daily newspaper *Der Standard* from March 29/30, 2025.

Constructive Realism can serve to overcome such fundamental intellectual challenges of our time, due to the development of a new type of thinking structure for the sciences (in an interdisciplinary sense). The special feature of CR is that it offers an alternative to universalistic claims to absoluteness on the one hand and relativistic viewpoints on the other. In this respect, CR positions itself beyond (radically) constructivist as well as beyond (naively) realist viewpoints, whereby scientific propositional systems can nevertheless claim to be binding despite their qualification as constructs (see e.g. Brousek 2017, 2020a, 2020b; Greiner 2005; Wallner 1990, 2002). Following and further developing Wittgenstein's (1953) concept of *language-game*, CR and its epistemological method of "strangification" have made it possible to develop a procedure that takes into account the increasing awareness of the cultural dependency of science (see Wallner 1997). Moreover, it also serves scientists as a reflection tool for understanding their own scientific constructs (see Greiner 2005; cf. Wallner 1992). "Strangification" means to place a statement or system of propositions – such as a scientific thesis – in a different disciplinary or cultural context and to understand it from the perspective of that context. The irritations that may result from *strangifying* serve to gain knowledge about unreflected assumptions and presuppositions, so to speak disciplinary blind spots, which underlie the *strangified* sentence system.

The basic idea of this procedure is based on one of Wittgenstein's (1953) central findings with regard to the human capacity of language: a *language-game* cannot become comprehensible by itself. It requires a different context, a translation so to speak, in order to become comprehensible (cf. Ochoa 1995). The implicit methodological or disciplinary blind spots that come to light throughout the process point to the paradigmatic, cultural or even life-world limits of the applicability or validity of the claimed "scientific" statements. This method of translation is necessary in order to take account of the complexity of (the) reality of our lives and not to reduce "the" world and "reality" to just a single (methodological) perspective. However, by definition, this is only possible through dialog between people from different scientific disciplines, cultural or subcultural contexts; in order to – interdisciplinary and interculturally – explore their subjective perspectives and life-worlds with each other (cf. Bohm 1996; Brousek 2017, 2020b; Hashi 2011, 2015).

It should be clear from the above that the process of strangification is by no means just an epistemological instrument, but rather a hermeneutic tool for the "improvement" of human communication and, above all, socio-political pacification. As for politics, such a "strangifying" dialog can work as de-radicalization program (see Wallner/Brousek 2018). In the very best case

it can even foster reconciliation between people with contradicting political positions or people who represent incompatible narratives, such as historical ones (see Brousek/Pirker 2016; Brousek/Grafenauer/Wintersteiner/Wutti 2020). In the context of historical research and its communication, it should be noted that the subjective micro-histories offer a possibility to connect incompatible macro-histories.³ Consequently, we need subjective micro-histories in order to be able to understand the scope of validity of supposedly objective macro-histories. This train of thought can probably be better understood with reference to Wittgenstein's metaphor of "family resemblance": micro-histories function as the *interlocking fibers of a thread* that connects the partly incompatible narratives of macro-history. In such an understanding, a specific historical narrative can still be binding despite the presence of a contradictory narrative, namely by *commitment* through *connectedness*.

The epistemological concept on which these explanations about history and politics are based, are founded on a deeply democratic understanding of science, in which the scientific qualification of a statement can be understood as the result of a (democratic) process of negotiation; in contrast to the autocratic assertion of supposedly unquestionable objectivity. In order to prevent science from degenerating into an autocratic or even dictatorial system or a substitute religion with eternally valid truths, openness and awareness of the central importance of subjectivity for the creation of knowledge are required.

In this respect, the book project aims to demonstrate the experiences and possibilities of a *constructive-realist* methodology for different disciplines and the exchange between them. The associated training in *constructive-realist* thinking is intended to raise awareness of a critical and self-reflective approach to "knowledge", not least in order to counter any misuse of science in the public sphere. To this end, long-time companions from different phases of the development of CR, as well as current research colleagues from various disciplines from all over the world, have been invited to shed light on different aspects of Wallner's work from several disciplinary and cultural perspectives. The nineteen contributors from Asia and Europe as well as North and South America explain and evaluate Friedrich Wallner's work and show the numerous fields of application and possibilities for further development, but of course also point out the vagueness and limitations of CR. Accordingly, the book with its eighteen contributions is divided into five sections.

3 Cf. the project "Dialogisches Erinnern – la memoria dialogica – dialoško spominjanje" (dialogical remembrance) in the course of which teaching materials that use micro-histories to convey and understand macro-histories have been created. For further information see the trilingual website: <https://dialogischeserinnern.at>