Routledge Philosophy Companions

Routledge Philosophy Companions offer thorough, high quality surveys and assessments of the major topics and periods in philosophy. Covering key problems, themes and thinkers, all entries are specially commissioned for each volume and written by leading scholars in the field. Clear, accessible and carefully edited and organized, *Routledge Philosophy Companions* are indispensable for anyone coming to a major topic or period in philosophy, as well as for the more advanced reader.

The Routledge Companion to Free Will
Edited by Kevin Timpe, Meghan Griffith, and Neil Levy

The Routledge Companion to Sixteenth Century Philosophy
Edited by Benjamin Hill and Henrik Lagerlund

The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Social Science
Edited by Lee McIntyre and Alex Rosenberg

The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy
Edited by Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, and Alison Stone

—

For a full list of published *Routledge Philosophy Companions*, please visit www.routledge.com/series/PHILCOMP.

Forthcoming

The Routledge Companion to Seventeenth Century Philosophy
Edited by Dan Kaufman

The Routledge Companion to Thought Experiments
Edited by James Robert Brown, Yiftach Fehige, and Michael T. Stuart

The Routledge Companion to Medieval Philosophy
Edited by Richard Cross and JT Paasch

The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Race
Edited by Paul C. Taylor, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Luvell Anderson

The Routledge Companion to Environmental Ethics
Edited by Benjamin Hale and Andrew Light

The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Technology
Edited by Joseph Pitt and Ashley Shew Helfin

The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Psychology, Second Edition
Edited by Sarah Robins, John Symons, and Paco Calvo

The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy
Edited by Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne

The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School
Edited by Axel Honneth, Espen Hammer, and Peter Gordon

The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Physics
Edited by Eleanor Knox and Alastair Wilson

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

Edited by
Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, and Alison Stone

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2017
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Names: Garry, Ann, editor.
Title: The Routledge companion to feminist philosophy / edited by Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, and Alison Stone.
Description: 1 [edition]. | New York : Routledge, 2017. |
Series: Routledge philosophy companions | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016046368 | ISBN 9781138795921 (hardback)
Subjects: LCSH: Feminist theory.
Classification: LCC HQ1190 .R68 2017 | DDC 305.4201—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016046368

ISBN: 978-1-138-79592-1 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-75815-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Goudy Oldstyle Std
by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

CONTENTS

13

THE SEX/GENDER DISTINCTION AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Sally Haslanger

Introduction

The claim that gender (or other categories) is socially constructed is broadly accepted, but what this means is controversial and often unclear. In this chapter, I will sketch some different meanings of the claim that something is socially constructed and why these claims matter. For the purposes of this chapter, my focus will be to consider how the different senses of construction might apply especially in the case of gender.

The Construction of Ideas and Concepts

Ian Hacking urges us to distinguish the construction of ideas and the construction of objects (Hacking 1999: 9–16; Haslanger 2012: ch 3). Let's start with "ideas." What does it mean to say that the concept of gender, or the idea that females should not be sexually attracted to other females, is socially constructed? Plausibly, the claim is simply that they are products of a socio-historical process. However, that would seem to be utterly obvious. Surely at least most ideas and concepts are only possible within and due to a social context (allowing that there are also innate cognitive processes and structures that also play a role). Concepts are taught to us by our parents as we learn language; different cultures have overlapping but also distinct concepts and ideas; and concepts as well as ideas evolve over time as a result of historical changes, science, technological advances, etc. Let's (albeit contentiously) call this the "ordinary view" of concepts and ideas.

Even someone who believes that our scientific concepts perfectly map "nature's joints" can allow that scientists come to have the ideas and concepts they do through social-historical processes. After all, social and cultural forces (including, possibly, the practices and methods of science) may help us develop concepts that are apt or

accurate, and beliefs that are true. We may sometimes forget that social forces affect what and how we think because our experiences seem to be caused simply and directly by the world itself. However, it does not take much prompting to recall that our culture is largely responsible for the interpretive tools we bring to the world in order to understand it. Once we've noted that our experience of the world is already an interpretation of it, we can begin to raise questions about the adequacy of our conceptual framework. Concepts help us organize phenomena; different concepts organize it in different ways. It is important, then, to ask: what phenomena does a particular framework highlight and what are eclipsed? What assumptions provide structure for the framework?

For example, our everyday framework for thinking about human beings is structured by the assumption that there are two (and only two) sexes, and that every human is either a male or a female. But in fact a significant percentage of humans have a mix of male and female anatomical features. Intersexed bodies are eclipsed in our everyday framework (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Rubin 2012). Thus, we should ask: why two sexes? Whose interests are served, if anyone's, by the intersexed being ignored in the dominant conceptual framework? (It can't be plausibly argued that sex isn't important enough to us to make fine-grained distinctions between bodies.) Assuming for the moment that sex can be distinguished from gender (more on this later), our everyday framework also assumes that there are only two genders, but this obscures those who are gender queer as well as third sexes found in other cultures (Herdt 1993).

Once we recognize that our everyday framework has eclipsed a kind or category, how should we respond? For example, how should we revise our conceptual framework once we notice the intersexed and gender queer (Butler 1990: ch. 1; Fausto-Sterling 2000)? Should we group humans into more than two sexes or genders, or are there reasons instead to complicate the definitions to include everyone in just two sex/gender categories? Or should we stop classifying by sex and gender altogether? More generally, on what basis should we decide what categories to use? In asking these questions it is important to remember that an idea or conceptual framework may be inadequate without being false, e.g., a claim might be true and yet incomplete, misleading, unjustified, biased, etc. (Anderson 1995; Haslanger 2016).

The point of saying that a concept or idea is socially constructed will vary depending on context. Sometimes it may have little or no point, if everyone is fully aware of the social history of the idea in question or if the social history isn't relevant to the issue at hand. On other occasions, saying that an idea is socially constructed is a reminder of the ordinary view of concepts and, more importantly, an invitation to notice the motivations behind and limitations of our current framework. Every framework will have some limits; the issue is whether the limits eclipse something that, given the legitimate goals of our inquiry, matters.

Often, the claim that a concept or idea is socially constructed is accompanied by genealogical inquiry. The genealogy of a concept or idea explores its history, not because the origin of a concept determines its proper content, but in order to situate the concept within our social practices (Haslanger 2012: ch. 13). Consider, for example, Daston and Galison's recent genealogy of the concept of *objectivity*. They suggest that in the case of complex and historically significant concepts, there is often a "smear of meanings," that cannot be usefully parsed by a priori inquiry alone (Daston and Galison 2007: 52). So their approach is to explore how the ideal of objectivity guided scientific practice in different periods.

> If actions are substituted for concepts and practices for meanings, the focus on the nebulous notion of objectivity sharpens. Scientific objectivity resolves into the gestures, techniques, habits, and temperament ingrained by training and daily repetition. It is manifest in images, jottings in lab notebooks, logical notations; objectivity in shirtsleeves, not in a marble chiton . . . . It is by performing certain actions over and over again . . . that objectivity comes into being. To paraphrase Aristotle on ethics, one becomes objective by performing objective acts. Instead of a pre-existing ideal being applied to a workaday world, it is the other way around: the ideal and ethos are gradually built up and bodied out by thousands of concrete actions as a mosaic takes shape from thousands of tiny fragments of colored glass. To study objectivity in shirtsleeves is to watch objectivity in the making.
>
> (Daston and Galison 2007: 52)

They convincingly demonstrate that the notion of objectivity has changed dramatically over time. For example, in Descartes' work, the objective is what is available as the object of consciousness, in contrast to the object in the world. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, objective inquiry aimed to capture the perfect or ideal exemplar; but soon after, influenced by the development of photography, the goal was to capture the world "untouched by human hands" (Daston and Galison 2007: 43) and to catalogue its detailed specificity and imperfections.

Such genealogies offer two valuable lessons: First, what strikes us as obvious or unquestionable is the result of a complex social and intellectual history; we might have taken very different things for granted, employed very different distinctions, and reasonably so. However, the best genealogies do not leave us with a sense of arbitrariness, but of richness and opportunity. Our conceptual repertoires are at least partly a matter of choice. We can create different and improved tools to accomplish our cognitive ends. Second, our cognitive tools are not just "in the head" but are enacted and embodied in practices that engage the material world. The products of our practices—some of them material, such as lab notebooks and cameras, and others institutional, such as universities and bureaucracies—make a difference to how and what we think.

These two lessons are importantly related. Our practices are shaped by historically contingent assumptions, and the practices, in turn, reinforce those assumptions by materializing them. But genealogy allows us to see that we have choices about the assumptions we make, and material changes—including not only new technologies, but also new institutions and bureaucracies—can render questionable what seemed obvious. A space opens for critique: our ideas and practices are not necessitated by the world, but are the products of history, a history in which we are agents and whose trajectory we can change.

For example, Anne Fausto-Sterling characterizes her book *Sexing the Body* (2000) this way:

> The central tenet of this book is that truths about human sexuality created by scholars in general and by biologists in particular are one component of political, social, and moral struggles about our cultures and economies. At the same time, components of our political, social, and moral struggles become, quite literally, embodied, incorporated into our very physiological

> being. My intent is to show how these mutually dependent claims work, in part by addressing such issues as how—through their daily lives, experiments, and medical practices—scientists create truths about sexuality; how our bodies incorporate and confirm these truths; and how these truths, sculpted by the social milieu in which biologists practice their trade, in turn refashion our cultural environment.
>
> (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 5)

This interdependence between thought and practice is especially evident in feminist work that has documented how the sex/gender binary has not only been assumed, but also *enforced* (Butler 1990; 2004; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Richardson 2012; 2015). For example, intersexed infants have been surgically altered to conform to binary assumptions about the proper size, shape, and function of genitalia (e.g., Kessler 1990, 1998; Dreger and Herndon 2009). However, historical and scientific genealogies of the concepts that guide our enforcement of sex/gender show that our understanding of sex is culturally conditioned; this seems to give us options.

> Our bodies are too complex to provide clear-cut answers about sexual difference. The more we look for a simple physical basis for "sex," the more it becomes clear that "sex" is not a pure physical category. What bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already entangled in our ideas about gender.
>
> (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 4)

Note that Fausto-Sterling's claim here that "sex" *is not a pure physical category* is ambiguous. It could mean that the conditions for being male or female include non-physical properties. This is true according to some definitions of sex (Fausto-Sterling 1997). However, I take her to be making a different point in this quote, namely, that there are a variety of options for defining sex that, *considering the physical facts alone*, are equally good. We have chosen one definition for socio-cultural reasons, but it may be better for us to choose another. So there is an important sense in which how we define the distinction (or whether we do at all) is up to us, but this is consistent with there being physical differences between sexes.

So to claim that our concept of X (or idea concerning X) is socially constructed can be more than to claim that we developed it through a socio-historical process. It adds to this that nature (or whatever foundational source of truth we might be seeking) doesn't necessitate that we opt for one particular understanding, but leaves it at least somewhat open. For example, the fact that nature does not dictate a sex binary—we could identify more than two sexes, or allow some to be without sex—is crucial to the claim that our concept of sex is socially constructed. The fact that we have to surgically create a binary is some evidence that the difference is not "purely natural." But if our particular conception of X is "not inevitable" or required, then we should not only question our thinking, but also the practices that depend on it and enforce it (see also Sveinsdóttir 2011; Haslanger 2016).

Social constructionism is generally offered as an alternative to essentialism; both come in different forms. Drawing on the link between thought and practice, Alison

Stone (2004) explicitly takes up a genealogical approach to the social construction of gender to avoid the pitfalls of an essentialism that assumes there is some feature or features that all women share, by virtue of which they are women. She claims that

> women always become women by reworking pre-established cultural interpretations of femininity, so that they become located—together with all other women—within a history of overlapping chains of interpretation. Although women do not share any common understanding or experience of femininity, they nevertheless belong to a distinctive social group in virtue of being situated within this complex history.
>
> (Stone 2004: 137)

On her account, the group is unified by virtue of the members situating themselves in relation to the lineage of meanings associated with women, i.e., "women only become women, or acquire femininity, by taking up existing interpretations and concepts of femininity . . . . [i.e.] through active appropriation and personalizing of inherited cultural standards" (Stone 2004: 149). By incorporating the historical variability of practices of femininity, Stone aims to identify a unity for gender that is weaker than sharing an essence, but also stronger than family resemblance.

Stone employs the notion of genealogy not only to reconstruct the history of the concept or idea of gender through its practices, but also to identify a source of unity of the group, *women* (2004: 150). Women are a social kind, i.e., the group consists of those who situate themselves within the local practices *as women* (or *as feminine?*). Stone (2004) concludes that this kind has no essence (according to her concept of essence). However, it is arguable that on her account, *women* are a kind with an historical essence, i.e., a kind unified by reference to an historical process of replication and revision (Bach 2012). An historical conception of gender allows for substantial intrinsic diversity, while also providing a basis for political unity through a shared lineage of gender practices. Stone's account gives us important resources to avoid certain forms of essentialism, but because it is focused on the agency and activity involved in "appropriating and personalizing" the norms of femininity, it neglects pre-agentic females and those women whose agency is compromised. Moreover, the account fails to provide a basis for identifying what counts as a *gender* norm or for differentiating *gender* practices from other social practices: if the lineage of relevant practices is not identified by reference to the ideology of bodies that guides them (Alcoff 2005; Haslanger 2012: ch. 6), the content of their identities (Chodorow 1978), or their function (Bach 2012), then by virtue of what are they *gender* practices?

Social Construction and Illusion

It is also possible to find the claim that something or other is "merely" a social construction, with the implication that what we are taking to be real is only a fiction, an idea that fails to capture reality (see also Haslanger 2006). Such eliminativist implications are common in the case of race, i.e., often when someone says that race is socially constructed, they mean that race is an illusion (Glasgow 2008).

Feminists have argued, for example, that certain mental "disorders" that have been used to diagnose battered women are merely social constructions. Andrea Westlund points out how

> [b]attered women's "abnormalities" have been described and redescribed within the psychiatric literature of the twentieth century, characterized as everything from hysteria to masochistic or self-defeating personality disorders (SDPD) to codependency . . . Moreover, such pathologies measure, classify, and define battered women's deviance not just from "normal" female behavior but also from universalized male norms of independence and self-interest.
>
> (Westlund 1999: 1050–1051)

Such diagnoses invite us to explain domestic violence by reference to the woman's psychological state rather than the batterer's need for power and control; they also "deflect attention from the social and political aspects of domestic violence to the private neuroses to which women as a group are thought to be prone" (Westlund 1999: 1051). These diagnoses, it could be claimed, are merely social constructions in the sense that they are ideas used to interpret and regulate social phenomena, but do not describe *anything* real. To say, then, that "self-defeating personality disorder" is a social construct is to say that it doesn't exist.

We can gain insight into this eliminativist use of the term "social construction" if we link it to the genealogical approach considered above. Suppose we find through examining the practices in which the concept is used, that the concept we thought was of a certain kind, is not. For example, suppose we think that "self-defeating personality disorder," if it exists at all, must be an individual psychological pathology. If, however, there is no clear psychological phenomenon where we took there to be, and if we take it to be part of the content of the concept that it is a psychological disorder, then it is tempting to conclude that it doesn't exist and we were wrong all along. If, however, we allow that we might have been wrong about the kind of thing we were talking about, then we need not take the eliminativist route. For example, there are family system pathologies and cultural syndromes that are not individual pathologies. One might argue, then, that "self-defeating personality disorder" *really is* a social pathology. In other words, we would offer a very different construal of the target concept. Is this shifting the meaning of the term? Or is it discovering the meaning? Often this is exactly the issue at stake between eliminativist and non-eliminativist social constructionists.

The Social Construction of Objects

Let's now turn to the construction of objects (understanding "objects" in the broadest sense as virtually anything that's not an idea). What are some examples? Beauvoir (1989 [1949]: 267) famously claims, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." But when we say that gender is a social construct, could we possibly mean that individual women and men are social constructions? What could this mean? Aren't women and men human beings, and aren't human beings a kind of animal?

We saw above that our cognitive tools are enacted and embodied in our practices. So at least in social contexts, our classifications may do more than just map pre-existing groups of individuals; rather our attributions have the power to both establish and reinforce groupings that may eventually come to "fit" the classifications. This works in several ways. Ian Hacking (1999) describes the "looping effect" of social kinds. In such cases, forms of description or classification provide for kinds of intention; e.g., given the classification *refugee*, I can set about to become a refugee, or avoid being a refugee (Hacking 1999: 32). And such classifications can function in justifying behavior; e.g., "We cannot send her back

to Syria because she is a refugee" (note that there are international laws about the treatment of refugees as opposed to migrants). Such justifications, in turn, can reinforce the distinction between refugees and non-refugees. Social construction in this sense is ubiquitous. Each of us is socially constructed in this sense because we are (to a significant extent) the individuals we are today as a result of what has been attributed (and self-attributed) to us.

To say that an entity is "discursively constructed" in this sense, is not to say that language or discourse brings a material object into existence *de novo* (Haslanger 2012: ch. 2). Rather something in existence comes to have—partly as a result of having been categorized in a certain way—a set of features that qualify it as a member of a certain kind or sort. My having been categorized as a female at birth (and consistently since then) has been a factor in how I've been viewed and treated; these views and treatments have, in turn, played an important causal role in my becoming gendered a woman (see also Haslanger 2012: ch. 1). But discourse didn't bring me into existence.

It would appear that gender (in different senses) is both an idea-construction and an object-construction. Gender is an idea-construction because the classification men/women is the contingent result of historical events and forces. At the same time these classifications are crucial to explaining what Hacking calls "interactive kinds": gender classifications occur within a complex matrix of institutions and practices, and being classified as a woman, or a man, or a different sex/gender, or not, has a profound effect on an individual. Such classification will have a material affect on her social position as well as affect her experience and self-understanding.

Linda Alcoff's (2005) account of gender, or gender identity, provides an excellent example of such looping effects. She suggests, as a start:

> Women and men are differentiated by virtue of their different relationship of possibility to biological reproduction, with biological reproduction referring to conceiving, giving birth, and breast-feeding, involving one's own body . . . . Those classified as women will have a different set of practices, expectations, and feelings in regard to reproduction, no matter how actual [or not] their relationship of possibility is to it.
>
> (Alcoff 2005: 172)

The different relationship of possibility is not, in her terms, an "objective" fact, but is a matter of what socio-cultural resources are available, specifically in constructing horizons of meaning (Alcoff 2005: 125f, 145, 175f):

> [E]ach individual's horizon is significantly incorporative of social dimensions or shared features. The practices and meanings that are intelligible to me are ontologically grounded in group interactions, which are themselves structured by political economies of social structures.
>
> (Alcoff 2005: 121)

> The possibility of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and in many societies, rape, are parts of females' horizons that we carry with us throughout childhood and much or all of our adult lives. The way these are figured, imagined, experienced, accepted, and so on, is as variable as culture. But these elements exist in the female horizon, and they exist there because of the ways in which we are embodied.
>
> (Alcoff 2005: 176)

Alcoff's account has an advantage over Stone's insofar as it gives us a basis for distinguishing gender practices and meanings from others via the links to reproductive embodiment. It is somewhat unclear, however, how this account would be developed to accommodate the tensions between the classifications (gender ascriptions), bodies, and identities of transwomen (Connell 2012).

The Social Construction of Kinds

We have considered the social construction of ideas and objects. Yet the most common examples of social construction, it seems, are kinds, e.g., gender, race, disability, family, the nation, meat/food. It is important to distinguish between the social construction of ideas and objects because it is easy to confuse the idea of a kind, i.e., a classificatory tool, from the kind itself. Unless we draw this distinction we won't be able to recognize the interaction between the tool and the reality it purports to track. This looping interaction is crucial to the idea of social construction of all sorts.

Above I argued that we claim that an idea or concept is socially constructed to call attention to the fact that it is a product of a social and intellectual history. I suggested further that, at least in some cases, to attend to the social construction of a concept is to note that it is possible to grasp the relevant phenomena, be it in nature or other form of reality, without employing that exact concept. That is, the framework we have for understanding this bit of the world is "not inevitable" and is in some sense "up to us." This matters because we have a way of making reality conform to our idea of it, and if we are unhappy with the reality, it is useful to know if it is the way it is because we have made it so, or because there is no reasonable or realistic alternative.

How does this bear on kinds? The social constructionist is keen to draw our attention one or another of two mistakes that we are tempted to make about kinds, given how our understanding of them interacts with reality:

i) We may think that the commonality that the members of the kind share is caused by natural facts and forces, but instead, our social arrangements are (in some important way) causally responsible for the commonality. For example, it may be worth pointing out that poverty is socially constructed to make clear that poverty is *not* a result of (alleged) laziness or stupidity of the poor, but due to social/political structures. Or it might be worth pointing out that disability is socially constructed to make clear that disability is *not* the result of impairment, but of the social management of differently abled bodies.

ii) The dominant understanding of the kind might locate the commonality between the members' non-social properties, e.g., natural properties, but what the members of the kind share are really social properties (and relations). For example, it may be worth pointing out that races are *not* constituted by people with a certain "blood," i.e., genetic profile, but by how people with bodily markers associated with relatively recent ancestry in a particular geographical region are viewed and treated (Haslanger 2012: ch. 6). Or it might be worth pointing out that food is *not* what is digestible by humans, but what cultures deem appropriate to eat. To say that food is socially constructed in this sense is not to say that humans cause or create food (though of course we do), but that cultural meanings *constitute what food is*.

The difference between (i) and (ii) is a difference between what *causes* commonality and what *constitutes* commonality. It is important to note that social kinds cannot be equated with things that have social causes. Sociobiologists claim that some social phenomena have biological causes; some feminists claim that some anatomical phenomena have social causes. What is the cause of the average height differences between males and females? Some argue that it is due to the broad preference for males to be the taller in a heterosexual couple. But is that preference a result of social norms or biological imperatives? More generally, it is an error to treat the conditions by virtue of which something counts as a social entity as causing the entity. Something is a house by providing stable shelter to an individual or group of individuals. A builder putting bricks or boards together in a certain way causes the house to exist.

In (ii), the point is to distinguish social kinds from physical or other non-social kinds where what's at issue is the basis of commonality between the members. It is significant that not all social kinds are obviously social. Sometimes it is assumed that the conditions for membership in a kind concern only or primarily biological or physical facts. Pointing out that this is wrong can have important consequences. In the case of gender, the idea would be that gender is not a classification scheme based simply on anatomical or biological differences, but marks social differences between individuals. Gender, as opposed to sex, is not about testicles and ovaries, the penis and the uterus, but about identities or about the location of groups within a system of social relations (MacKinnon 1989; Haslanger 2012: ch. 6). One could allow that the categories of sex and gender interact (so concerns with distinctions between bodies will influence social divisions and vice versa); but even to be clear how they interact, we should differentiate them. Using the terms "male" and "female" to mark the current familiar sex distinction, and "man" and "woman" the gender distinction, one should allow that on this account of gender, it is plausible that some males are women and some females are men. Because one is a female by virtue of some (contextually variable) set of anatomical features, and one is a woman by virtue of one's identity or position within a social and economic system, the sex/gender distinction gives us some (at least preliminary) resources for including trans* persons within our conceptual framework (cf. Jenkins 2016).

Because gender is at least partly a function of one's role in a social framework or identification as one of those who typically (in the local context) occupy that role, if we allow that social phenomena are highly variable across time, cultures, groups, then this also allows us to recognize that the specific details of what it is to be a woman will differ depending on one's race, ethnicity, class, etc. My being a woman occurs in a context in which I am also White and privileged; my actual social position will therefore be affected by multiple factors simultaneously. I learned the norms of WASP womanhood, not Black womanhood. And even if I reject many of those norms, I benefit from the fact that they are broadly accepted. The social constructionist's goal is often to challenge the appearance of inevitability of the category in question. As things are arranged now, there are men and women, and people of different races. But if social conditions changed substantially, there may be no men and women, and no people of different races. To make the category visible as a social as opposed to physical category sometimes requires a rather radical change in our thinking.

Conclusion

In the account of social construction I've sketched, there are several different senses in which gender, race, and the like are socially constructed. First, the conceptual framework that we take as just "common sense" about gender is only one way of understanding the world. There are, and have been, other ways; there are (I believe) better ways. Moreover, there are ideas associated with gender that are "merely" constructions, e.g., fictions about biological essences and genetic determination are used to reinforce belief in the rightness and inevitability of the classifications. This is not to say, however, that gender is not "real." Although some ideas about gender are fictions, these fictional ideas have functioned to create and reinforce gender reality. These categories of people are, I would argue, not just ideas, but social entities. Such entities are socially constructed in the sense that they are caused by social forces, but also because the conditions for membership in a gender group are social (as opposed to, say, merely physical or anatomical) conditions. Finally, individual members of such groups are, in a rather extended sense socially constructed, insofar as they are affected by the social processes that constitute the groups. Human beings are social beings in the sense that we are deeply responsive to our social context and become the physical and psychological beings we are through interaction with others. One feminist hope is that we can become, through the construction of new and different practices, gendered differently and potentially new sorts of beings altogether.

Further Reading

Antony, Louise (2000) "Natures and Norms," *Ethics* 111(1): 8–36. (This title argues that the appeal to nature(s) is compatible with feminism, for the fact that something is natural does not assure its normative status.)

Foucault, Michel (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Volume. I: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon. (A classic that undertakes a genealogy of sex and sexuality.)

Mallon, Ron (2007) "A Field Guide to Social Construction," *Philosophy Compass* 2(1): 93–108. (Offers a helpful overview of social construction on topics beyond sex/gender.)

Shrage, Laurie (2009) *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (A collection of eleven philosophical essays on sex reassignment and its implications for thinking about sex, gender, and identity.)

Witt, Charlotte (2011) *The Metaphysics of Gender*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Argues for a social gender essentialism, challenging the idea that essentialism is incompatible with feminism.)

Related Topics

Feminism, philosophy, and culture in Africa (Chapter 4); feminist essentialism and anti-essentialism (Chapter 14); materiality: sex, gender, and what lies beneath (Chapter 16); personal identity and relational selves (Chapter 18); values, practices, and metaphysical assumptions in the biological sciences (Chapter 26); through the looking glass: trans theory meets feminist philosophy (Chapter 32).

References

Alcoff, Linda Martin (2005) *Visible Identities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Anderson, Elizabeth (1995) "Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology," *Philosophical Topics* 23(2): 27–58.

Bach, Theodore (2012) "Gender Is a Natural Kind with an Historical Essence," *Ethics* 122(2): 231–272

Beauvoir, Simone de (1989 [1949]) *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley, New York: Vintage.

Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble*, New York: Routledge.

_____ (2004) *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge.

Chodorow, Nancy (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Connell, Raewyn (2012) "Transsexual Women and Feminist Thought: Toward New Understanding and New Politics," *Signs* (37)4: 857–881.

Daston, Lorraine and Galison, Peter (2007) *Objectivity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Dreger, Alice D. and Herndon, April M. (2009) "Progress and Politics in the Intersex Rights Movement: Feminist Theory in Action," *GLQ* 15(2): 199–224.

Fausto-Sterling, Anne (1997) "How to Build a Man," in Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo (Eds.) *The Gender/Sexuality Reader*, New York: Routledge, 244–248.

——(2000) *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, New York: Basic Books.

Glasgow, Joshua (2008) *A Theory of Race*, New York: Routledge.

Hacking, Ian (1999) *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Haslanger, Sally (2006) "Gender and Social Construction: Who? What? When Where? How?" in Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger (Eds.) *Theorizing Feminisms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 16–23.

——(2012) *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——(2016) "Theorizing with a Purpose: The Many Kinds of Sex," in Catherine Kendig (Ed.) *Natural Kinds and Classification in Scientific Practice*, New York: Routledge, 129–144.

Herdt, Gilbert (1993) *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, New York: Zone Books.

Jenkins, Katharine (2016) "Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman," *Ethics* 126(2): 394–421.

Kessler, Suzanne J. (1990) "The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management of Intersexed Infants," *Signs* 16(1): 3–26.

——(1998) *Lessons from the Intersexed*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

MacKinnon, Catharine (1989) *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Richardson, Sarah S. (2012) "Sexing the X: How the X Became the "Female Chromosome," *Signs* 37(4): 909–933.

—— (2015) *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Rubin, David A. (2012) "An Unnamed Blank That Craved a Name: A Genealogy of Intersex as Gender," *Signs* 37(4): 883–908.

Stone, Alison (2004) "Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1:135–153.

Sveinsdóttir, Ásta (2011) "The Metaphysics of Sex and Gender," in Charlotte Witt (Ed.) *Feminist Metaphysics*, Dordrecht: Springer, 47–65.

Westlund, Andrea (1999) "Pre-Modern and Modern Power: Foucault and the Case of Domestic Violence," *Signs* 24(4): 1045–1066.