

Social Constructionism and Relativism: An Aporia?

ABIGAIL KLASSEN *University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

ABSTRACT: I analyze the extent to which the theoretical cogency and practical efficacy of descriptive and ameliorative social constructionist programs are affected by relativism in the context of competing analyses of some purported social construction X. My task in this paper is successful if it can explain, organize, and clarify how relativism concerning the question 'What should our concept of X be?' affects social constructionist programs, and ameliorative versions of social constructionism especially. In this paper, I aim to make clearer to those not well-versed in this field what is at stake in these programs and why these programs should not be easily dismissed.

RÉSUMÉ : J'analyse dans quelle mesure la cohérence théorique et l'efficacité pratique des approches constructionnistes sociales, en particulier les approches descriptives ou amélioratives, sont affectées par le relativisme dans le contexte d'analyses concurrentes d'une construction, prétendue sociale, de X. Ma tâche dans cet article consiste à expliquer, organiser, et clarifier comment le relativisme appliqué à la question «Quel devrait être notre concept de X?» affecte les approches constructionnistes sociales — en particulier, les versions amélioratives. Cet article vise à clarifier, pour ceux qui ne sont pas versés dans ce domaine, ce qui est en jeu dans ces approches et pourquoi elles ne doivent pas être facilement rejetées.

Keywords: social constructionism, relativism, social metaphysics, progress, feminist philosophy

1. Introducing Social and Ameliorative Metaphysics

In this paper, I explore a worry that may undermine or vitiate the cogency, scope, and success of social constructionist programs undertaken under the

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auspices of philosophy. The worry I raise, namely relativism, threatens social constructionism generally, though it may seem especially damaging for ameliorative versions of constructionism. This worry will be fleshed out in the following sections. Following the spirit of Sally Haslanger's *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, I characterize ameliorative social constructionist programs as asking not just 'What social factors constitute and sustain X?' (the question asked by descriptive social constructionists), but also, 'What work do we want our concept X ('woman,' 'race,' 'agendered,' etc.) to do?' The spectre of relativism is taken by some to create a serious problem for ameliorative social constructionist analyses. Haslanger's work, as well as other ameliorative social constructionist work, has produced controversy and confusion related to how to go about determining which account of some X is most ameliorative and why.¹ While ameliorative metaphysical projects are not new, feminist social constructionist programs—a sub-species of ameliorative social constructionist programs—are relatively new in analytic philosophy. Moreover, the reception of such programs has been slow to reach much of the mainstream. Currently, at least in the context of analytic philosophy, there is but a small niche of theorists who write specifically in this field.

Ameliorative social constructionist programs, especially those of the feminist variety, place heavy emphasis on what's involved in the metaphysics and epistemology of the social world. With the aim of bolstering these programs' philosophical relevance, herein I explain, organize, and clarify how relativism concerning the question 'What *should* our concept of X be?' affects social constructionist programs, and ameliorative versions of social constructionism especially. Although I write in defence of feminist ameliorative concerns and programs, I do not personally advocate any kind of feminist agenda and nor do I endorse social constructionism understood as a metaphysical position or as a political tool. Rather, what I offer is a survey or critique—an analysis of what social constructionist projects, considered generally, purport to offer and what they do and might offer. This analysis uncovers and assesses the ontology and epistemology that social constructionism presupposes and upon which it draws, as well as the ethical premises and conclusions that are sometimes implicit or explicit elements of its projects. Drawing largely from Lorraine Code's "Must a Feminist Be a Relativist After All?" in her *Rhetorical Spaces*:

¹ See especially, Barnes (2014), Jenkins (2015), Jones (2014), and Mills (2013). Some philosophers and other theorists claim that ameliorative social constructionist projects are hands-down damned by relativist concerns. Some also say that these projects are political and not 'properly' or 'seriously' philosophical. I have been told on many an occasion to leave my worries about these projects to a blog. The short list I provide in this footnote of recent publications on feminist ameliorative social constructionist programs speaks to the novelty of these projects and their contentious standing as 'properly' metaphysical projects.

Essays on Gendered Locations, I argue that, while worries surrounding relativism are live, they do not wholly undermine social constructionist programs, whether these programs are primarily descriptive or ameliorative. I aim to make clearer, to those not well-versed in this field, what is at stake in these programs and why these programs should not be easily dismissed.

I intend this paper to act as a survey of the general feminist social constructionist landscape, at least as I currently see it. My motivation for writing this paper spawned from the mixed reception that I received and continue to receive, particularly from feminist philosophers, in presenting my work on ameliorative metaphysics. Many audiences display unease with the relation between social constructionism and relativism. Often, my applauding relativism results in an upset audience—even an audience with postmodernists included (What, after all, *is* relativism?). My paper aims, not to dispel, but to *calm*, worries surrounding the relation between relativism and social constructionism. More controversially, I propose that embracing relativism is helpful in explaining and encouraging ameliorative social change.

2. The Charge of Relativism Against Ameliorative Social Constructionist Programs

In *The Social Construction of What?* Ian Hacking writes of relativism in the context of social constructionism thus:

Relativism and decline are real worries, but I am not going to address them directly. It is good to stay away from them, for I cannot expect to successfully dispel or solve problems where so many wise heads have written so many wise words without effect.²

Perhaps over-ambitiously then, I take on the issue of epistemological and metaphysical relativism in descriptive and ameliorative social constructionist programs. The separation between epistemology and metaphysics is especially messy in the context of social phenomena. The separation is messy because the social world is constituted by intersubjectively mind-dependent phenomena and phenomena parasitic on intersubjective mind-dependent phenomena. To state the point differently, if social beliefs, habits, practices, and phenomena *constitute* the social world, “then it seems a description of the ideological formations will be true, and it is unclear what is, [both metaphysically and] epistemically speaking, wrong with them.”³

I begin by articulating the purportedly problematic relation between relativism and ameliorative constructionist programs. The charge of relativism begins by acknowledging that different people can hold different and perhaps

² Hacking (1999), 5.

³ Haslanger (2012), 467.

incompatible beliefs about the epistemology or metaphysics of some X (a practice, category, concept) and that there may exist no standard by which to judge the better from the worse other than by each party's own lights. Factors that may contribute to such disagreements include culture, gender, class, and religion. Without strong agreement concerning what X is or what X should be, solidarity is often undermined. Here, I have in mind the oft-cited arguments of liberal feminists against postmodern feminists, for example; the former group often complains that the latter group's theoretical commitments (or lack thereof) undermine solidarity and effective social change. Despite Hacking's warning, I hope to show that my undertaking is not a purely Sisyphean task or a fool's errand. Much can be learned from unpacking and making clearer the manners in which relativism affects social constructionism, especially ameliorative versions. Theoretically and practically, it is also beneficial to examine the extent to which, as well as the manner in which, various forms of relativism pose a threat to social constructionist projects, whether descriptive or ameliorative.

If relativism in descriptive and ameliorative social constructionist projects is sometimes unavoidable, I ask whether relativism must be solipsistic and aporetic. What I call 'solipsistic relativism' denies the moral right and epistemic credibility of non-members (e.g., men) to participate in defining or redefining human kind-concepts under which they do not fall (e.g., 'woman') or rejects the moral right or epistemic authority of some members belonging to a kind to define or redefine that kind for all of its members. With respect to metaphysics, solipsism sees a particular social group's or community's social categories, as well as those categories' correlating constraints and enablements,⁴ as isolated and insulated from the social categories of other social groups and communities. Solipsistic relativism typically produces stalemates between isolated conceptual silos or competing wills to power, and so is oftentimes aporetic.

The reasons for undertaking a social constructionist analysis need not be purely academic or intellectual. Instead, a social constructionist analysis may be motivated by more explicit political or ethical concerns (contrast Hacking's description of historical constructionists from his descriptions of reforming, rebellious, and revolutionary constructionists). The latter analyses are in the domain of ameliorative constructionist programs. Ameliorative programs assume values and offer particular descriptions and proposed epistemological or metaphysical redescrptions of some X in light of those values. Being imbued by ethical or political concerns, ameliorative social constructionist projects contrast with descriptive projects, though, of course, we should not think of description as entirely or necessarily value free. In focusing on one purportedly problematic X rather than another or in focusing on one aspect of X rather than another, descriptive constructionists also assume values, albeit less obviously.

⁴ I borrow the language of 'constraints and enablements' from Sveinsdóttir (2013).

I do not intend my contrast between descriptive and ameliorative constructionism to fully address the issue of whether a description can ever be wholly value neutral.

Because ameliorative social constructionists' descriptions and redescrptions of social phenomena are permeated with values, if audiences to whom an ameliorative program is intended to address do not share the values of the proffered program, the descriptions and redescrptions offered may simply be ignored or taken as unrelatable. That is, a constructionist's proposed program may be too far afield from its intended audience's set of beliefs to be taken up as a serious contender for acceptance by that audience. This worry, as I will show, applies to the relation between solipsistic and aporetic relativism and constructionist projects. Moreover, this worry likely affects the success of specific ameliorative social constructionist programs.

In what follows, I aim to demonstrate, at least in the context of negotiating and renegotiating social-kind categories, that solipsistic relativism is indeed avoidable. Opening up the possibility of non-pernicious (non-solipsistic) relativism is particularly apt in light of some less recent, but strong philosophical accounts of the possibility of emancipatory relativisms (cf., Alcoff and Code). In eschewing a false dichotomy between "correspondence or construction; knowledge or interpretation; truth or anything goes," Code's account of a 'positive' or 'enabling' relativism offers a constructive rather than a purely negative and immobilizing program that "works with the construction of, out of, or from, interpretation of, truths about. . . ."⁵

The recognition that, in part or entirely, some kinds, categories, and phenomena are constituted and sustained by social attitudes frees us from the seeming inevitability and impermeability of 'nature' and 'objective reality.' However, this recognition leaves us vulnerable to other people's (individuals', groups', communities', or cultures') descriptions and redescrptions, whether specialist or folk. Social constructionist projects cannot avoid disagreement within and between specialists and the folk about who does or does not count as X or what constitutes an X. These problems cannot be avoided in ameliorative programs either. Difficulties persist because social constructionists cannot appeal to veridicality with the world to settle questions of what X is or what X should be. This appeal is rudderless since constructionists might be attempting to challenge dominant understandings of some concept or phenomenon and because constructionists claim that it is socially constructed reality, not mind-independent reality that constitutes the kinds at issue in the first place.

In the spirit of Mary Kate McGowan's "On Pornography: MacKinnon, Speech Acts, and 'False' Construction," before the ameliorative social constructionist can begin the project of attempting to ameliorate X and before we can ask the question of what ameliorating X entails, we need a sense of what X

⁵ Code (1995), 196.

refers to, what X means, and how X purportedly functions to oppress or otherwise harm in some context. As McGowan emphasizes, reasonable people often disagree about the extension of some X and they also disagree about whose judgements most matter for settling the issue. There may also be disagreement about how X (understood as either a manifest or operative concept) functions in the larger social world and what effects—what constraints and enablements—these conceptions bring or should bring about. In *Resisting Reality*, one method Haslanger proposes for remedying such disagreements seeks to align manifest concept(s) of X with the operative concept(s) of X or to propose an altogether new target concept of X.

For Haslanger, a ‘manifest concept’ is the concept with which one takes oneself to think (consciously or unconsciously) and the concept that one takes oneself to apply in sorting instances of Xs from non-Xs.⁶ This is the concept arrived at through what Haslanger refers to as the ‘conceptual’ or ‘internalist’ approach.⁷ An ‘operative concept’ is the concept that best captures the distinction that one actually makes in practice, which may or may not align with one’s manifest concept.⁸ Lastly, a ‘target concept’ is “that concept that, all things considered (my purposes, the facts, etc.), I should be employing” (this concept is sought by ameliorative projects).⁹ According to Haslanger, whether or not the content between a society’s concept and an individual’s or some individuals’ conceptions coincide, it is possible that disparate manifest and operative concepts can operate together in some social matrix. One task of debunking projects, as Haslanger understands them, is to reveal to individuals and groups that, unbeknownst to them, their manifest and operative concepts may not align. One reason Haslanger sees this exercise as having political or moral relevance is that, in some cases, underscoring the fact that our manifest concepts do not match our operative concepts makes it possible to expose how official and unofficial political and social concepts, for example, are masking how concepts actually operate. For Haslanger, the ultimate goal of an ameliorative project is to arrive at a situation where our manifest, operative, and target concepts align.

3. The Battle over the Ameliorative Meanings of ‘Woman,’ ‘Feminism,’ and ‘Marriage’: Case Studies in Relativism

For elucidation of the seemingly tenuous relation between relativism and ameliorative social constructionist projects, I turn to the controversy over the meaning of ‘woman.’ In *Feminism After Postmodernism: Theorising Through Practice*, Marysia Zalewski colourfully illustrates the vast extent of disagreement between feminist theorists when it comes to the question ‘What is a woman?’

⁶ Haslanger (2012), 388.

⁷ Haslanger (2012), 388.

⁸ Haslanger (2012), 389.

⁹ Haslanger (2012), 389.

Imagine Andrea Dworkin and Judith Butler in a conversation about feminism. Would they, could they, agree on anything? Think ... about a conversation between them on male violence towards women. ... Would Andrea Dworkin speak about a 'war against women?' Or about a continuum of male violence from the cradle to the grave; from the bedroom to the boardroom? And would Judith Butler resist such terms and instead question the authority of those who claim that they can speak on behalf of such a disparate group called 'women?'¹⁰

There is little consensus among feminists (both within and outside the academy) regarding the meaning and extension of 'woman' or the goals of feminism(s). There is little consensus, too, about whether this lack of agreement constitutes a shortcoming or a virtue of feminism(s).

Individual feminist accounts may be singled out as unserviceable in the task of liberating women—an unsurprising situation, perhaps, given the lack of consensus surrounding the meaning of 'woman' in the first place. Catherine MacKinnon's analyses (see especially MacKinnon (1987), (1989), (1993), (1997)) of the meaning(s) of 'woman,' for instance, may present meanings too radical to resonate with the majority of her audience, and thus may fail to motivate her audience to engender change (though, of course, there will be those who *are* motivated by MacKinnon's and other seemingly radical accounts). For MacKinnon, there exists an inextricable link between the meaning/referent of 'woman' and pornography. According to McGowan, MacKinnon views pornography as constructing the meaning of 'woman' in a way that is harmful and covert; pornography unconsciously conditions men's beliefs and desires as well as women's self-understanding.¹¹ MacKinnon characterizes pornography as simultaneously constructing what women *are* (which amounts to what they are perceived to be and what they are perceived as being *for*) while discrediting women's dissent concerning what they have been made to *be*.

McGowan glosses MacKinnon's view thus:

Like so many other social constructions, [pornography] appears to be doing one thing while it actually does another. In other words, ... [pornography's] true function is effectively masked. It appears to be merely mirroring an independent and antecedent fact about women's real natures while it actually enacts what women count as being.¹²

By MacKinnon's lights, it is a social fact that women *are* (only?) sexual objects. To disarm this fact, MacKinnon argues that pornography's real function must be unmasked and its power over our (women's and men's) imaginations dismantled in order that women are no longer (only?) sexual objects.

¹⁰ Zalewski (2000), 1.

¹¹ McGowan (2005), 30.

¹² McGowan (2005), 33.

The main point I wish to draw attention to is that MacKinnon's definition or concept of 'woman' is considered by many to be too radical. The radicalism of a proposed definition or concept of any X is one of several reasons that a proposed definition or concept might be rejected by an audience as unserviceable in terms of achieving some goal—in MacKinnon's case, the goal of liberating women. This concern falls under the auspices of worries surrounding relativism and ameliorative social constructionist programs. Put simply, while some understand MacKinnon's account of 'woman' to be apt (even if radical), many others do not. In 1983, Alison Jaggar comfortably asserted that "all feminists address the same problem: what constitutes the oppression of women and how can that oppression be ended?"¹³ Given present day feminist debates, Jaggar's confident declaration to know what all feminists think or do seems misplaced. Does it really matter that there exists no unanimity? Should consensus even be a goal of feminism? The very proliferation of feminisms and the many proposed answers to the question 'What is a woman?' constitute, for many, a cause for frustration. This frustration, however, may be unavoidable. Understandings of 'woman' are time and place bound; hence, the very notion of consensus concerning the meaning of 'woman' is complicated at best and perhaps even inappropriate. Another cause of frustration may be the sense that, without consensus concerning the meaning of 'woman' and without common goals, solidarity is difficult to achieve and effective political action is rudderless or will result, at best, in small unequally impactful amendments.

The existence of internal disputes between feminists may also undermine feminism altogether, leading some to ask 'Why even bother?' When an individual's or group's construal of 'woman' is taken to be unjust by another individual or group, relativism about the meaning of 'woman' can be more than frustrating—it can be distressing. The meanings of masculinity, femininity, and even gender itself change depending on social location and historical period. But there is even a further issue to consider in postmodern feminist debates: the attempt to tie down the meaning of 'woman' is itself considered an example of the reification of concepts and categories that many postmodernists in particular attempt to expose and reject.

Haslanger's take on disagreement about some social phenomenon X, in this case the institution of marriage, is worth quoting in full. She is happy to grant, in abstraction, that in order "to critique our social milieu we need a moral/political theory."¹⁴ But, she goes on:

The debunking project ... is not undertaken in abstraction. It is undertaken to reveal to an interlocutor that there is something flawed in their understanding of their own practices—and flawed *in their own terms*. For example, the critical charge is not that

¹³ Jaggar as found in Zalewski (2000), 124.

¹⁴ Haslanger, personal correspondence, 2014.

the traditional understanding of marriage as heterosexual violates some moral principle; rather, it is that insofar as the interlocutor (allowing that the interlocutor can be a group) is committed to a certain value to be found in marriage—the social recognition of love and commitment, say—then this conflicts with the reality of what they have made marriage into. The interlocutor has a choice, then, to change what counts as marriage (by changing the laws, etc.) or to adopt different practices that recognize love and commitment in inclusive ways. The choice here is political, but it doesn't leave us with relativism. There are different acceptable ways for the interlocutor to go on. The critical theorist is critical—demanding moral/political consistency of their interlocutor. The claim is not that one way of resolving the internal conflict between their values and practices is true and justified but to reveal that there is a conflict and to invite the interlocutor to change the world to accord with their values.¹⁵

What is crucial about Haslanger's claim is her general point that we can critique the positions of opponents on grounds of internal inconsistencies. This critique can be undertaken and can go some way toward reforms even without reaching consensus about basic values.¹⁶

Given metaphysical and epistemological disagreement concerning what constitutes some social categories and phenomena, questions such as 'Is same-sex marriage ameliorative or emancipatory?' or 'Is such and such a view of women accurate or emancipatory?' must be reformulated to read 'Is same-sex marriage ameliorative or emancipatory for individuals X, Y, Z or groups A, B, C?' and 'Is such and such a view of women accurate or emancipatory for individuals X, Y, Z or groups A, B, C?' In other words, as the preceding quotation of Haslanger underscores, the emancipatory potential of various social constructionist movements must be understood and judged in immanent rather than transcendental terms. This is to say that the goals of an ameliorative constructionist program will always be relative to the problems and goals of some community. With respect to marriage, in some situations, the goal might be to ensure better rights for women where patriarchal and heterosexist conceptions of marriage reign. In other situations, the goal may be to better solidify the acceptance of same-sex marriage in law and in the lived world alike. In yet other situations, the goal may even be to eradicate the practice of marriage altogether.

From this relativization, however, it follows that the so-called 'emancipatory' potential and strategies of social constructionist critiques can be claimed by cults, fanatic religious groups, and xenophobic racist groups, for instance. The morally and politically objectionable ideologies of such groups (from the

¹⁵ Haslanger, personal correspondence, 2014.

¹⁶ I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping to bring out the force and relevance of Haslanger's view to my project.

perspective of liberal, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-heterosexist social constructionists) can claim to offer emancipation just as much as can more progressively oriented ideologies.¹⁷ This worry cannot be dismissed consistently by well-meaning or progressive (i.e., liberal, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-heterosexist) social constructionists. If a progressive social constructionist (as I have defined these constructionists) cannot move those who hold morally and politically objectionable ideologies to alter their beliefs, while this is unfortunate, it does not wholly undermine the goals of progressive ameliorative social constructionist programs. Some persons will not be moved, but others may be encouraged to progressively alter their beliefs or practices to varying degrees.

The extent to which cults, fanatic religious groups, and xenophobic racist groups are (in)capable of altering their beliefs is likely a reflection of, at least in part, their isolation from other groups' social descriptions and more progressive ideologies. If morally or politically objectionable ideologies are just as socially constructed as those of progressive ideologies, then judgements that one ideology is more rational, reasonable, or enlightened than the other will seem persuasive only to those already committed to the ideology being recommended. Hence, perhaps in many cases, the real grounds and mechanisms for altering beliefs, actions, and practices are more a matter of power or persuasion than a matter of reason. In the next section, I address the importance of having, as mechanisms for altering beliefs and actions, alternative descriptions and ideologies available within a community. Access to alternative social understandings is necessary for the success of progressive ideologies.

4. Ameliorative Social Constructionism's Relation to Relativism, Fallibilism, and Pragmatism

Code's "Must a Feminist Be a Relativist After All?" is fruitful for exploring the relation between relativism and social constructionism. As she emphasizes, one reason to resist relativism is based on the conviction that relativism is politically disarming. Code glosses the concern of many anti-relativists thus: relativism generates an 'anything goes' attitude according to which there is no way to choose between conflicting claims, sometimes therefore leading to quietude.¹⁸ Worries surrounding relativism derive from the consequence of "remaining caught in a dichotomous set of discursive patterns for which relativism is necessarily irrationalist, subjectivist, and anti-realist."¹⁹ Yet she also argues that a rearticulated relativism can "dispel the quietude it produces."²⁰ According to Code, relativism best captures the phenomenology, epistemology,

¹⁷ Thanks to David Jopling for emphasizing this important limitation of ameliorative social constructionist programs.

¹⁸ Code (1995), 190.

¹⁹ Code (1995), 193.

²⁰ Code (1995), 190.

and ontology of the social world. As she emphasizes, relativism acknowledges that human beings are social and historical creatures and, therefore, that our reason does not possess the power to understand issues definitively, to carve out ethical principles true for all across all times and spaces, or to produce unanimity about what ought to be done.

Given Code's characterization of relativism, one might say that relativism, at least as the notion is employed herein, entails, and perhaps even welcomes, fallibilism.²¹ I do not see relativism and fallibilism as competitive; rather, I see relativism and fallibilism as emphasizing different aspects of the same situation in which everyday humans, communities, and societies find themselves both epistemically and metaphysically. As beliefs, concepts, practices, and other mind-dependent phenomena are argued to be in need of amelioration, these arguments implicitly commit themselves to the possibility of having got things wrong and of getting them wrong again. In this context, 'wrong' refers, not to a failure to correspond to the way the world is in itself, but to a failure to achieve some goal or a failure to see the wrongdoings in what one carries out in the everyday world—what one believes, what content one has for one's concepts, and so forth. Appealing to the way the world is independent of us does not help to dispel relativism. Instead, this move simply misses the point. Once we have granted that something is socially constructed, there is no point in appealing to the way the world is independent of human beings and their ideas as arguments for why some X should be amended or done away with. The arguments presented for why one understanding of X is better than another will unavoidably be relative (and fallible) in the following sense: the very meanings of understanding, reason, and the possible content of imagination crucial for change are relative to specific times and places—meanings, understandings, and possibilities are *contextual*, *situational*, and ultimately *fallible* in the sense specified above.

With Richard Rorty's pragmatism in mind, most social constructionists likely agree that it would be more theoretically honest and politically expedient if everyone admitted that, with respect to disagreements over socially constructed categories like 'women,' there "is no way to break ... standoffs, no single place to which it is appropriate to step back."²² As Code writes, "knowledge is always *relative to* (a perspective *on*, a standpoint *in*) specifiable circumstances."²³ Although knowledge may be specified "*relative to* other circumstances, prejudgements, and theories, it is never ... necessary to take away all of the pieces ... at once."²⁴ On Code's view, inquiry both grows out of and is

²¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for alerting me to the importance of incorporating fallibilism into my account.

²² Rorty (1989), 51.

²³ Code (1995), 54.

²⁴ Code (1995), 55.

dependent on practice and action. That is, “inquirers are always in *media res*, and the *res* are both identifiable and constitutive of perspectives and possibilities for action.”²⁵ This is a position that permits both the development of practices and projects and their corrigibility.²⁶

Colin Koopman’s ‘transitionalist-pragmatist’ understanding of truth in *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty* is also consistent with the kind of immanent program ameliorative social constructionists are able to offer. Koopman’s understanding of truth takes into account that amelioration can only be understood as amelioration *for* or amelioration *according to*. He also emphasizes that a ‘transitionalist’ account of ethics best captures the ethics revealed by lived experience—our experience in the everyday social world. The ‘transitional-pragmatist’ account he propounds focuses

on ethical processes whereby we improve our living rather than on the supposed correctness of some isolatable act extracted from the transitional relations that define its contexts. Such accounts, in short, would emphasize that the true and the good themselves admit of temporal duration.²⁷

As Code elucidates, a relativist or contextualist account contrasts “with the abstractions of dislocated theory.”²⁸ The latter kind of theories attempt to develop *a priori* frameworks for knowledge or ultimate, absolute, timeless (non-socially caused or constituted) conditions for knowledge claims, “which evaluators could superimpose upon any putative claim to knowledge with the aim of assessing how that claim fits within the spaces the grid [i.e., the extant social framework] makes available. . . .”²⁹

While most contemporary epistemologists are well aware that claims to knowledge are indexed to contexts, pure epistemologists are not the targets of social constructionist programs. Constructionists take as their audience such a non-exhaustive list that includes the dogmatically religious, the scientifically minded, and anyone who believes that some X is inevitable when X is indeed socially founded or constituted. Social constructionists therefore also aim to highlight to their audiences that X is alterable and that the truth (or the search for truth) will not involve an ultimately dislocated and inevitable framework.³⁰

²⁵ Code (1995), 55.

²⁶ Code (1995), 55.

²⁷ Koopman (2009), 12.

²⁸ Code (1995), xi.

²⁹ Code (1995), xi.

³⁰ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on the relation between standard analytic epistemology and Code’s (1995) emphasis on context, as well as the relation of standard analytic epistemology, Code’s concerns with the situatedness of knowledge, and social constructionist projects.

Contra abstract theory, “knowers are always *somewhere*—and at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations.”³¹ Values, beliefs, conceptions, and habits are always “grounded in experiences and practices, in the efficacy of dialogic negotiation and action.”³² Dialogic negotiation and action make possible the amelioration of disvalued aspects of persons’ and groups’ situations. It is cultural community that provides the stimulus for human beings’ self-understandings and understandings of others. To be a member of a particular group is to learn and absorb (most of?) its values, concepts, and habits of interaction. Put more simply, we are who we are, at least in part, because of what others have attributed to us and because of what we self-confer in light of others’ attributions upon us. By belonging to a particular group, through interpellation, a subject gains a sense of himself or herself. At the same time, the dialogic nature of much of the social world suggests that the meaning of any target or otherwise purportedly ameliorative social concept may be contested; dialogue invites multiple interpretations and may generate significant conflicts.

It is in encountering alternative descriptions of one’s community or culture by outsiders or by ‘non-conformists within’ that a community or culture can come to appreciate or recognize the inadequacies of one’s own value system, concepts, habits, and practices. It is in encountering alternative value systems, concepts, habits, and practices that persons, communities, and entire cultures can be stimulated to alter values, conceptions, practices, and to learn new habits. Hopefully, such encounters prove ameliorative to those who compose the community or culture. This is a process that involves

intersubjective negotiations among people who are intersubjectively *constituted*, produced as epistemic and moral-political subjects in processes that are social, interconnected throughout their lives, and determinant of the quality of those lives in ways too numerous to detail.³³

Social-kind membership and identity conditions are essentially relational and contextual. The deep relationality of social-kind membership and social identity, as well as the social construction and social dependence of rationality, progress, and emancipation, prevent ameliorative projects from a wholly undermining threat of solipsistic or aporetic relativism. In Shannon Sullivan’s “Reconfiguring Gender with John Dewey: Habit, Bodies, and Cultural Change,” this intertwining of the social and the self, with a particular emphasis on individuals’ social identities, is underscored. The social categories to which we belong and the social properties we possess are not merely “external, accidental characteristic[s] overlaying the (allegedly) internal, essential ... core

³¹ Code (1995), 53.

³² Code (1995), 53.

³³ Code (1995), xiv.

of ourselves.”³⁴ As she suggests, employing a Deweyan analogy, “[I]ike the structure of a house, which is not something the house submits to but is what allows it to effectively be what it is, the cultural constructs that structure us *are* us.”³⁵ According to Sullivan, relational properties—that is, *social* properties—are not to be construed as simply and only negative, but also as “the means by which I take up and engage my world ... [and] not merely obstacles to that process.”³⁶

Unlike the accounts of Haslanger, Code, Koopman, and Sullivan, epistemological and metaphysical accounts that fail to emphasize the largely extrinsic or relational aspects of people’s identities also reveal a picture that does not do justice to how social identities are lived and renegotiated in the everyday world. On a primarily non-extrinsic or non-relational understanding of the self, the ‘real’ self “engages in rational deliberation over ends and ... achieves autonomy by freely choosing, rather than blindly accepting, its doxastic commitments, including its cultural and religious traditions.”³⁷ On this view, “a person who cannot gain critical distance from ... his or her cultural traditions cannot rationally assess them and thus cannot attain full autonomy.”³⁸

We might, as Sullivan does, invoke Judith Butler’s notion of performativity to challenge this non-relational framework of identity. The *performativity* of identity (in its serious rather than its playful mood)—or in Deweyan terms the ‘sedimentation of habit’—entails that identities cannot be taken up at will or discarded altogether. As Butler suggests, “[s]uch a wilful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender [for example], is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided by gender.”³⁹ Similarly, as Sullivan proposes, while social constructs (categories, properties, and so forth) are indeed, in Foucauldian spirit, constraining and normalizing, they also produce subjectivity through interpellation; social constructs are simultaneously the very tools by which effective resistance to hegemonic norms is made possible.⁴⁰

There is no social self that precedes its membership in social categories and ideologies and there is no social identity or social-kind membership that is not also a form of subjugation. Even those born into privilege are subjugated with respect to their social identities. This is because, as with any other social identity, the constraints and enablements that follow from social identities are, to a significant degree, *predetermined* or beyond an individual’s control. Yet, given

³⁴ Sullivan (2000), 26.

³⁵ Sullivan (2000), 26.

³⁶ Sullivan (2000), 29.

³⁷ Alcoff (2006), 21-22.

³⁸ Alcoff (2006), 22.

³⁹ Butler (1993), x.

⁴⁰ Sullivan (2000), 32.

that the world is simultaneously upheld, created, and transformed by ideologies (whether ‘ideology’ is understood in a descriptive or pernicious sense), socialization and subjugation are the means by which interpellation occurs. Socialization and subjugation are thus necessary conditions for becoming an agent. In turn, socialization and subjugation are therefore also necessary for the resistance or renegotiation of social categorizations and their associated constraints and enablements.

On the view of the social self that I have been elucidating in this section, I follow Linda M. Alcoff in viewing social identities as “relational, contextual, and *fundamental*.”⁴¹ This is because, as Alcoff writes:

The mediations performed by individuals in processes of self-interpretation, the mediations by which individual experience comes to have specific meanings, are produced through a foreknowledge or historical a priori that is cultural, historical, politically situated, and *collective*.⁴²

The worry that ameliorative projects may collapse into a war of competing, *isolated*, and *insulated* wills to power (between individuals or collectives) is blocked if one conceives of identity, both epistemologically and metaphysically, not as a “discrete and stable set of interests, but as [an ontologically open] site from which one must engage in the process of meaning-making”—the only site from which one can proffer redescriptions.⁴³ If the meaning of belonging to some social category is always relational and potentially alterable in light of interactions with others, then the threat of solipsistic and aporetic relativism in descriptive and ameliorative social constructionist programs, at least with respect to the social world, is calmed. I elaborate further on the disarmament of solipsistic and aporetic relativism in the context of social constructionism in the following section.

5. Further Dismantling the Spectre of Aporitic Relativism

In “Kinds of People: Moving Targets,” two phenomena analyzed by Hacking also block the possibility of solipsistic epistemological or metaphysical relativism: (i) ‘making up people,’ which refers to the ways in which new classifications sometimes bring into being a new way of being a person—a new way for a person to conceive of and experience themselves as a kind of person and (ii) the ‘looping effect,’ which refers to the way the classification of a kind of a person can interact with the person classified. These phenomena reveal that the very classifications under which individuals fall and the very classifications people take up and live out as ‘ways to be a person,’ to borrow

⁴¹ Alcoff (2006), 90, emphasis mine.

⁴² Alcoff (2006), 45.

⁴³ Alcoff (2006), 43.

Hacking's language, involve social or extrinsic factors. When it comes to social categorization and self- or group-interpretation, the mediations by which categories and ways of being a person come to have specific meanings and associated constraints and enablements always pull us back into the realm of the social; solipsistic worries are thus rudderless.

Social tolerance and space for reasonable dissent serve to mitigate worries about, to use Code's language, an 'anything goes' attitude. What is tolerated socially may not be the most ethical option available writ large, but social toleration and its normalizing effects often nonetheless curb an attitude of 'anything goes.' At the same time, a society that works to create and preserve spaces for dissent in turn works to keep a healthy scepticism alive with respect to the status quo. While this balance between social toleration and dissent is not always met, the existence of societies approximating or even aiming for this balance as a regulative goal weakens the threat of an 'anything goes' attitude that is often associated with relativism.

When it comes to social phenomena, relativism has different import than it might when discussing non-social subject matters. In the social domain, the subject matter (the social phenomena) at issue is constituted, at least partly, by human attitudes and practices. In many cases, there exists fairly wide consensus within and across social milieus about what constitutes some X and what constraints and enablements X does or should carry. However, disagreement about what constitutes some X (e.g., whether a transgender woman is really a woman) or what constraints or enablements do or should follow from being some X is also not uncommon across social milieus. The social world is characterized by ever-shifting patterns of toleration and assent, as well as disagreement and dissent, about the nature of its categories, as well as what constraints and enablements these categories do and should produce.

I have sought to underscore the claim that the separation between epistemology and metaphysics is especially complicated in social ontology. This complication exists because it is intersubjectively mind-dependent phenomena or phenomena parasitic on intersubjective mind-dependent phenomena that constitute the objects and categories of our social world. But intersubjective agreement about what X is or should be is not typically universal across social situations. Even when universality is approximated, individuals and groups may accept (in the sense of recognize and act in accordance with) socially sanctioned conceptions of X, but withhold *assent* to these socially sanctioned conceptions. I have also argued that relativism (as construed, e.g., in Code (1995)) is more than an aberration; it just *is* the ordinary state of our social world. Relativism is actually part and parcel of the status quo.

Whether they engage in descriptive or ameliorative projects, relativism about whose account of X is the 'most accurate' or the 'most ameliorative' is not an issue that social constructionists can ignore. But this paper undertakes the task of showing that relativism need not be seen *only* as an obstacle to social change. Relativism can also be productive. Code reminds us that such

‘urgent questions’ as “How can a relativist show that her opponents are wrong?” or “Has a relativist not painted herself into a corner?” gloss over the interactions of people in the everyday world.⁴⁴ “[P]eople often talk to one another, not just when they can assume a common ground, but also to negotiate across differences.”⁴⁵ By Code’s lights, anti-relativism under-emphasizes the dialogic character of the social world.⁴⁶ Indeed, social groups, communities, and cultures endure and prosper by self-modifying in light of new situations and interactions with outsiders rather than by enforcing all aspects of the extant culture by isolating their members from outside influences. Though coming to a better self-understanding and coming to better understand the culture and practices of others is probably not sufficient to remedy or defuse disagreements, it is methodologically prior to remedying or defusing disagreements.

A willingness to recognize communities and cultures as perpetually corrigible, alterable, and so, amenable to criticism and improvement is important for ameliorative social constructionists to emphasize since, ultimately, it is people who have the ability to amend—to recontextualize and redescribe— aspects of the social world. The pluralism of descriptions and redescrptions propounded by social constructionists about some purportedly social phenomenon is not necessarily indicative of a pernicious relativism. As Ernest Gellner writes in *Selected Philosophical Themes: Contemporary Thought and Politics*, Vol. II, a non-pernicious pluralism requires “that no violent non-logical pressures be used in supporting or defending ideas.”⁴⁷ Such toleration is conducive to argument, dissent, and persuasion; and, when the issue in question is of a political nature, “it demands the participation of all affected.”⁴⁸ That is, the ‘best’ answer “is best sought through a natural selection of reasons” and, when consensus fails, negotiation or persuasion is the next best option.⁴⁹ But all of this is possible only if there is, “so to speak, free entry into the market.”⁵⁰ Far from being necessarily pernicious in the sense of being solipsistic or aporetic, given the right conditions, relativism between alternative descriptive or ameliorative understandings of some X can be both enabling and productive. The multiplicity of non-homogenous analyses and genealogies of some X—or redescrptions of a given group’s, community’s, or culture’s current conceptions of X—allows individuals and collectivities, who, being necessarily situated and limited in perspective, to rethink or reimagine alternative possibilities of X.

⁴⁴ Code (1995), 204.

⁴⁵ Code (1995), 204.

⁴⁶ Code (1995), 204.

⁴⁷ Gellner (2003), 13.

⁴⁸ Gellner (2003), 13.

⁴⁹ Gellner (2003), 13.

⁵⁰ Gellner (2003), 13.

I have suggested that worries surrounding relativism do not, in principle, invalidate ameliorative social constructionism as a philosophical methodology or undermine reasonable hope that constructionists' projects will succeed. Following Code, I have argued that relativism need not be considered as wholly negative or immobilizing, but that, instead, relativism can be a productive tool in (hopefully emancipatory) social change.

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