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Ontology and Social Construction¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important projects of feminist theory has been to question traditional assumptions about what is “natural”; in particular, theorists have worked to disclose the variety of cultural mechanisms by which we “become” the gendered, raced, and sexual beings that we are. In a context where what is “natural” has been assumed to be fixed by nature, and so inevitable, appropriate, or even good, demonstrating the deep contingency of such categories of identity and their associated patterns of behavior has significant political force. Moreover, this research questioning our assumptions about what is natural shows that in a significant range of cases—at least in the case of race, gender, and sexuality—our efforts to classify things as “natural” or “objective” have failed, and this has prompted a general critique of the methods we have used to justify our classifications, as well as the political institutions built to accommodate them.

There is a broad consensus in this research that the reason why the previous models of justice, knowledge, and reality have gone so wrong is that they ignore the force of *social construction*; and yet there is striking diversity in how the term ‘social construction’ (and its cognates) is used and,

consequently, in what revisions to the old models are proposed. In addition to the claims that race, gender, and sexuality are socially constructed, it is also claimed, for example, that “the subject,” “identity,” “knowledge,” “truth,” “nature,” and “reality” are each socially constructed.² On occasion it is possible to find the claim that “everything” is socially constructed or that it is socially constructed “all the way down.”³ But once we come to the claim that *everything* is socially constructed, it appears a short step to the conclusion that there is no reality independent of our practices or of our language and that “truth” and “reality” are only fictions employed by the dominant to mask their power.⁴

Dramatic claims rejecting the legitimacy of such notions as “truth” and “reality” do appear in the work of feminist theorists, yet one also finds there a deep resistance to slipping into any form of idealism or relativism.⁵ For example, to quote Catharine MacKinnon’s typically vivid words:

Epistemologically speaking, women know the male world is out there because it hits them in the face. No matter how they think about it, try to think it out of existence or into a different shape, it remains independently real, keeps forcing them into certain molds. No matter what they think or do, they cannot get out of it. It has all the indeterminacy of a bridge abutment hit at sixty miles per hour.⁶

Bridge abutments and fists in the face are “independently real” at least in the sense that no individual or community of individuals can simply think them out of existence; fortunately, less-threatening parts of the physical world are similarly real—a change in my thinking, *by itself*, cannot make my body, my friends, or my neighborhood go out of existence, nor thankfully can a change in anyone else’s. To bring about a change in the world, you have to do more than just think about it. However, if we want to maintain a notion of independent reality, we should consider to what extent the research on social construction challenges the idea. If a strong case can be made for the claim that *reality* is socially constructed and, further, that what’s socially constructed is *not* independently real, then we may have to consider a more radically revisionary view about the world.

My project in this paper is to explore the claim that *reality* is socially constructed; more broadly, I hope to show how debates over such philosophical notions as “truth,” “knowledge,” and “reality” can be relevant to feminist and antiracist politics. In the following section I will consider what it means to say that something is socially constructed and will distinguish several senses of the term (allowing that there are also many others); I’ve chosen to set out this rather complex set of distinctions because their differences become significant in the arguments that follow. I’ll then turn to consider how far the claim that reality is socially constructed commits us to denying that the world

is, at least in part, independent of us. I will examine a strategy of argument claiming that because *knowledge* is socially constructed, there is no objective (and so no independent) reality. I argue, however, that even if this strategy provides good reason for rejecting one conception of “objective reality,” this does not force us into either skepticism or idealism, for there are other ways of conceiving what it means to be real and other ways of conceiving an “independent” reality. My intention here is not to offer an argument *for* realism, or *for* an independent reality; rather, it is (more modestly) to understand and evaluate some of the arguments that may seem to challenge such commitments.

2. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

As mentioned above, the notion of “social construction” is applied to a wide variety of items and seemingly with rather different senses.⁷ At least initially it is useful to think of social constructions on the model of artifacts.⁸ In addition to straightforward artifacts like washing machines and power drills, there is a clear sense in which, e.g., the Supreme Court of the United States and chess games are artifacts, as are languages, literature, and scientific inquiry. Because each of these depends for its existence on a complex social context, each is in the broad sense in question a social construction. So, let’s say:

Generic social construction: Something is a social construction in the generic sense just in case it is an intended or unintended product of a social practice.

Although it is fair to say that, generally speaking, social constructions are artifacts, this leaves much open, since there are many different kinds of artifacts and ways of being an artifact. In perhaps the paradigm case of artifacts, human beings play a causal role in bringing an object into existence in accordance with a design plan or to fulfill a specific function. However, the idea of artifact, and with it the idea of social construction, extends well beyond this paradigm case: Human intention or design is not always required (natural languages and cities are certainly artifacts, but they are not the work of an intentional agent or artisan); in other cases the issue does not concern origins but whether the conditions for being the kind of object in question make reference to social practices. For example, categories of individuals such as professors or wives and other *social* kinds count as social constructions because the conditions for being a member of the kind or category include *social* (properties and) relations: The category of wives counts because you can’t be a wife unless you are part of a social network that provides for an institution of marriage.

These examples suggest a distinction between *causal* and *constitutive* senses of construction that is important, for it makes a big difference to how we should evaluate the claim that something is socially constructed. For example, in some contexts, to say that “gender” is socially constructed is to make a claim about the causes of gender-coded traits in individuals; i.e., it is to claim that insofar as women are feminine and men are masculine, this is due (at least in part) to social causes and is not biologically determined.⁹ Presumably, in order to evaluate this claim, we would have reason to consider data from the social sciences, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history.

However, in other contexts the claim that “gender” is socially constructed is not a causal claim; rather, the point is constitutive: Gender should be understood as a social category whose definition makes reference to a broad network of social relations, and it is not simply a matter of anatomical differences.¹⁰ In this case, gender is introduced as an analytical tool to explain a range of social phenomena, and we evaluate the claim by considering the theoretical usefulness of such a category.¹¹ There is room for much debate here, not only over the question whether we should employ such a category, but if we do, how we should define it, i.e., what social relations (or clusters of social relations) constitute the groups *men* and *women*. (The debates here parallel others in social theory: One might debate whether the category “middle class” is useful to explain a range of social phenomena and, if so, how we should define it.)

To help keep distinct these different ways in which the social can function in construction, let’s distinguish:

Causal construction: Something is causally constructed iff social factors play a causal role in bringing it into existence or, to some substantial extent, in its being the way it is.

Constitutive construction: Something is constitutively constructed iff in defining it we must make reference to social factors.¹²

We need to consider causal construction further, for things get quite complicated when we consider how social factors can have an effect on the world (we’ll also return to constitutive construction below). At least in the case of human beings, the mere fact of how we are (even potentially) described or classified can have a direct impact on our self-understandings and our actions, because typically these descriptions and classifications bring with them normative expectations and evaluations. This works in several ways. Forms of description or classification provide for kinds of intention; e.g., given the classification “cool,” I can set out to become cool, or avoid being cool, etc. But also, such classifications can function in justifying behavior—e.g., “we didn’t invite him, because he’s not cool”—and such justifications, in turn,

can reinforce the distinction between those who are cool and those who are uncool.¹³

The main point to note here is that our classificatory schemes, at least in social contexts, may do more than just map preexisting groups of individuals; rather our attributions have the power to both establish and reinforce groupings which may eventually come to “fit” the classifications. In such cases, classificatory schemes function more like a script than a map. This gives us a narrower conception of social construction falling under the more general rubric of causal construction. On this conception something is socially constructed if what or how it is depends on a kind of feedback loop involving activities such as naming or classifying.¹⁴ Sometimes this form of construction is called “linguistic” or “discursive” construction,¹⁵ so I’ll keep with this terminology:

Discursive construction: Something is discursively constructed just in case it is the way it is, to some substantial extent, because of what is attributed (and/or self-attributed) to it.

I’d say that there is no doubt that in this sense you and I are socially constructed: We are the individuals we are today at least partly as a result of what has been attributed (and self-attributed) to us. In other words, there is a sense in which adult human beings are a special kind of artifact.¹⁶

Things get even more complicated, though, because there’s still another wrinkle to consider. The idea of discursive construction depends on there being descriptions, distinctions, and classifications at hand whose attribution to things makes a difference—I am the way I am today because people have had the linguistic and conceptual resources to describe me as, e.g., “smart” or “stupid,” “attractive” or “ugly.” There is yet another sense of social construction in which it makes sense to say that *these classificatory schemes themselves*—our distinctions such as smart or stupid, attractive or ugly, rather than the things that respond to them—are socially constructed. Very roughly, to say that such a scheme is socially constructed is to say that its use is determined, not by the “intrinsic” or “objective” features of the objects to which it is applied, but by social factors.¹⁷

This characterization is purposely vague; so to help us explore some of the issues involved in it let’s go back to the example of “being cool”: In considering our use of the distinction between those who are cool and those who are uncool, it is plausible to conclude that the distinction is not capturing intrinsic differences between people; rather it is a distinction marking certain social relations—i.e., it distinguishes status in the in-group—and the fact that it is employed in any given context is a reflection of the importance of in-group and out-group relations. For example, suppose I need a way to establish a cohort; I do so by calling those I like “cool” and those I don’t “uncool.” The distinction does not capture a difference in the individuals so-called except

insofar as they are related to me (based on my likes and dislikes), and its use in the context is determined not by the intrinsic or objective coolness of the individuals but by the social task of establishing a cohort.¹⁸

Noting the influence of social forces upon the distinctions we draw, let us define this third form of social construction, as follows:

Pragmatic construction: A classificatory apparatus (be it a full-blown classification scheme or just a conceptual distinction or descriptive term) is socially constructed just in case its use is determined, at least in part, by social factors.

Construed in its weakest form, the point in claiming that a given distinction is pragmatically constructed is simply to say that our use of that distinction is as much due to contingent historical and cultural influences as to anything else; we inherit vocabularies and classificatory projects and decide between alternatives based on utility, simplicity, etc. This point is easy to grant; it would be hard to deny that the discursive resources we employ are socially conditioned in these ways and more. In a stronger form, however, the point is that social factors *alone* determine our use of the distinction in question; in short it is to emphasize that there's no "fact of the matter" that the distinction captures. So let's distinguish two kinds of pragmatic construction:

A distinction is *weakly* pragmatically constructed if social factors only partly determine our use of it.

A distinction is *strongly* pragmatically constructed if social factors wholly determine our use of it, and it fails to represent accurately any "fact of the matter."¹⁹

We'll come back to the weak form of pragmatic construction shortly; let me first unpack this strong form further, because there is an ambiguity in the suggestion that there's no fact of the matter that such a pragmatically constructed distinction captures. In the example of "cool," I use the term to establish my cohort, and in doing so my ascriptions are guided by my likes and dislikes; so there may be a real social distinction (admittedly parochial) that corresponds to my use—I call Mary and George "cool," Susan and John "uncool," and the application of the terms corresponds to who I like and who I don't. But note also that in attributing "coolness" to someone, I'm doing so with the background assumption in play that the "coolness" is an intrinsic feature of the individual and is not merely a matter of who I like. In calling Mary and George "cool," I'm suggesting that there is something cool *about them* that has nothing to do with me—supposedly, it's *their coolness* that warrants my use of the term. It is here that the question of fact arises: Insofar as I am attributing intrinsic coolness to someone, my attribution misfires since no one is, so to speak, cool *in themselves*. In such cases I want to say that my attributions of coolness are false—there is no fact about their coolness that I am accurately representing, even if my use of the terms cor-

responds to some other features of the individuals, e.g., whether or not I like them.²⁰ So, *strong pragmatic constructions are, in an important sense, illusions projected onto the world; their use might nevertheless track—without accurately representing—a genuine distinction.* The main point is that in cases of strong pragmatic construction there are no available facts corresponding to the intended content—in the case at hand, about intrinsic coolness or uncoolness—that my attributions could be tracking, so instead, we might conclude, they must be functioning *wholly* as a means to a social goal.

On the face of it, there is a significant difference between weak and strong pragmatic construction. In cases of weak pragmatic construction our choices of descriptive terms, classificatory schemes, etc., are conditioned by social factors (values, interests, history, etc.), but of course this is compatible with those terms' and classifications' capturing real facts and distinctions. The world provides us with more facts and distinctions than we could ever know what to do with; acknowledging that what ones we bother to notice or name is largely determined by our background and interests does not impugn in any general way the accuracy of our attributions.²¹ In cases of strong pragmatic construction, however, the attributions are, by hypothesis, not accurately capturing facts, though there is an illusion that they are.

It is important to note that because in the case of pragmatic construction, what's constructed is (at least primarily) a distinction or classificatory scheme, the thought that our classifications are socially constructed leads naturally to the idea that *knowledge* is socially constructed. Given the preceding discussion, we must allow that there are different ways to cash out the claim that knowledge is socially constructed, but we can cast two of them in terms of weak and strong pragmatic construction. Roughly:

Our *knowledge* is weakly/strongly socially constructed (in the relevant senses) iff the distinctions and classifications we employ in making knowledge claims are weakly/strongly pragmatically constructed.

We now have three basic senses of construction to work with: causal, constitutive, and pragmatic. To see how these can become intertwined let's consider the project of debunking strong pragmatic constructions. Return once again to the case of "cool": Attributions of "coolness" have an effect on how individuals interact. "Cool dudes" are *discursively constructed*. But on the analysis I've been proposing, this happens as a result of a false and importantly misleading representation of the facts. I am suggesting that in contexts where "coolness" functions as a serious form of evaluation, there is general complicity in the belief that cool behavior is a result of a character trait (the person's *being cool*) that is the real basis for the evaluation. Cool dudes want their coolness, so to speak, to "shine through" in their behavior, dress, etc., so that they will win approval by the in-group; and the in-group acknowledges a distinction between *being cool* and just acting cool. Cool

things (objects, dress, actions) are the things cool people approve of (or would approve of). To debunk the belief that there is a special quality of coolness that warrants the designation “cool,” we show that there is no such property of “coolness” (so understood) and, in fact, that the application of the term “cool” is determined wholly by the interests and concerns of the in-group. In other words, “coolness,” when debunked, is revealed as a *constitutive construction*; i.e., the concept doing the work of determining when the term should be applied makes essential reference to social factors (i.e., in-group status).

But we must be careful here: What counts as the concept “cool”? Once we have disrupted the coolness illusion, there seem to be two different concepts playing a role in our use of the term. On the one hand, there is the concept that actually determines how we apply the term to cases, i.e., (roughly) being such as to conform to the standards of the in-group. Let’s call this the *operative concept*. On the other hand, there is the concept that users of the term typically take (or took) themselves to be applying, i.e., being intrinsically or objectively cool, where this is supposed to be the objective basis for the in-group standards. Let’s call this the *manifest concept*. In attributing “coolness” (or “uncoolness”) to someone, we are using the apparent objectivity of the manifest concept of “coolness” as a mask for the explicitly social content of the operative concept. But which of these two concepts is the concept “cool”? Both seem to be reasonable candidates: When we sincerely say that someone is “cool,” or when we begin the debunking project by insisting that we are mistaken in our attributions of coolness—no one is *really* cool—what’s at issue is the manifest concept; but once the debunking project has taken hold, it is tempting to break the illusion by saying that we were wrong about what “coolness” involved and that coolness itself is a constitutive construction. In this we shift from thinking of “cool” in terms of the manifest concept to the operative concept.

So in saying that “coolness” is a social construction, one could have in mind either (or both) (i) that “cool” individuals are discursively constructed (the pattern of behavior found in “cool” individuals is caused by a complex system of attribution and response) or (ii) that the operative concept expressed when we use the term “cool” is constitutively constructed (our use of the term “cool” is actually governed by conditions that concern in-group status, and the content normally associated with the term is a mask for these social conditions). These two ideas are intertwined because the discursive construction of “cool” individuals partly depends upon the (masked) attribution of the constitutively constructed concept “cool.”

To see more clearly how these different kinds of social construction function, let’s shift from the somewhat artificial example of “cool” I’ve been using to something more substantive and, for some, more familiar. I’ll run briefly through the different kinds by using an example of the social con-

struction of gender. As usual, allow at least a provisional distinction between sex and gender. Gender is defined relationally: Men and women are two groups defined by their social relations to each other. I've argued elsewhere,²² drawing on the work of Catharine MacKinnon, that we can usefully model one process by which gender is constructed roughly as follows: The ideal of Woman is an externalization of men's desire (so-called Woman's Nature is what men find desirable); this ideal is projected onto individual females and is regarded as intrinsic and essential to them. Accepting these attributions of Womanhood, individual women then internalize the norms appropriate to the ideal and aim to conform their behavior to them; and, in general, behavior towards women is "justified" by reference to this ideal. This, in turn, is responsible for significant empirical differences between men and women.

In this example, individual women are *discursively constructed*; i.e., we are the individuals we are because of the attribution (and self-attribution) of Womanhood to us or, more simply, because we've been viewed (and so treated) as having a Woman's Nature. Because discursive construction is a kind of causal construction, it is also correct to say that individual women are *causally constructed*. The ideal of Woman's Nature, however, is *strongly pragmatically constructed*; it is an illusion projected onto women whose basis lies in complex social-sexual relations, not in the intrinsic or essential features of women. As in the case of "cool," we debunk the idea of Woman's Nature and find two concepts at work: The manifest concept of Woman's Nature—understood as defining *what women are by nature* in traditional terms—is an illusion; the operative concept being masked by it is *constitutively constructed* in terms of men's (socially conditioned) sexual responses. Further, the distinctions between both man and woman, and male and female (taken as groups of individuals) are *weakly pragmatically constructed*; the fact that we draw these distinctions as we do is to be at least partly explained by social factors, though there are also very real differences between both men and women, male and female.

To summarize, the following would be plausible examples of each kind of construction:

Discursively (and so causally) constructed: individual women; cool dudes.

Strongly pragmatically constructed: Woman's Nature; intrinsic coolness.

Constitutively constructed: the operative concept of "coolness"; the operative concept of "Woman's Nature."

Weakly pragmatically constructed: the distinction between men and women, between male and female; the distinction between those who wear black t-shirts more than once a week and those who don't.

3. THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Given the different kinds of social construction just sketched, there are a variety of different senses we might give to the claim that *reality* is socially constructed. For example, the claim might be that human beings are in some significant way involved in bringing about or constituting everything there is or, more specifically, that our linguistic and conceptual activities are responsible for how things are. Alternatively, the claim might be that how we conceive of reality is determined wholly or partly by social factors. Are any of these claims plausible? And if so, should we be led to give up the idea that there is a world (in some sense) “independent” of us?

A. THE CAUSAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Consider, for the moment, causal construction. Is it plausible that the entire world—not just Earth, but everything there is—is a human artifact, even allowing that the mechanisms of construction might be highly complex and mediated? Is the world, for example, a product of our efforts at classification? I don’t think so. Clearly human beings have had an enormous effect on things: Mountains are damaged by acid rain, the polar icecaps are melting. And it is equally clear that our actions and classificatory efforts can make a big difference to the nonhuman world: Microbes adapt to our classifications of them by becoming immune to our antibacterial agents.²³ But not everything is so responsive to our activities, much less simply to our activities of naming; our causal powers, however grand, are limited; and it would be a conceptual stretch to suggest that something should count as an artifact by virtue of even the most remote human influence. (Even if we have had some causal impact on Alpha Centauri, does this make it a human artifact?)

But more important for our questions about independence, the model of causal construction seems to presuppose (at least in some cases) that the mind and world are distinct things that causally interact in complex ways. It is part of this presumption, I believe, that the world we affect exists independently of us, for the model is typically used to point out the extent to which human practices have had an impact on the world.²⁴ For example, opinions about what is appropriate for humans to eat and so about what counts as “food” have had a huge causal impact on the size, distribution, and behavior of animal populations. We may even want to say that in the causal sense, domesticated cows and chickens are socially constructed. But the deer in the woods, and the chickens in the barnyard (or more commonly, on the factory farm) are, nonetheless, independently real. Whatever might be at stake in claiming that there is an “independent reality,” the concern is not to insist upon a reality untouched by the actions of human beings. So at the very least, granting that the mind and the world each significantly affects the other does not itself

require us to compromise the idea of independence at stake in maintaining that some things are independently real. And even if the case could be made that reality (as a whole) were causally constructed, this reality might nonetheless be independent of us, for in general, claiming that something is causally constructed does not challenge its independent reality.²⁵

B. PRAGMATIC CONSTRUCTION OF OUR CONCEPT OF REALITY

Let us turn, then, to pragmatic construction. There can hardly be a doubt that the distinction we draw between what's real and what's unreal is pragmatically constructed at least in the weak sense; i.e., social factors play a role in determining our applications of the distinction. There are at least two different ways that social factors play an inevitable role in our application of *any* distinction. First, the fact that we have the linguistic and conceptual resources to draw the distinction in question (and that we have any interest in doing so) will always depend upon contingent historical and cultural factors; so the fact that the distinction is available in our conceptual repertoire at all is largely a social matter.

Second, any particular effort (at a particular time) to apply a distinction to something is influenced by social factors. For example, my ability to distinguish effectively *A*'s from *B*'s may depend on my confidence, ignorance, intelligence, bias, the incentives and costs, etc. So social factors play a role both in determining the content of the distinctions we make and in our efforts to apply them. The real-unreal distinction appears no different from any other in these respects, and I take these points to be completely uncontroversial. So there's at least one sense in which reality is socially constructed: The distinction between real and unreal—in fact, all of the substantive distinctions we employ—is weakly pragmatically constructed. But as suggested before, it is perfectly compatible with this that our distinctions are accurately capturing genuine—and independent—facts.

A full discussion of this last point could go on at some length, but it will be useful to respond briefly to a couple of concerns here. One might object to the claim that our socially situated inquiries capture independent facts as follows: Insofar as our inquiries are interest-laden, they cannot yield knowledge; so even if there is an independent world, we could never know that there is. Note first that the only way for this argument to get off the ground is for it to presuppose a distinction between cognitive and noncognitive interests, for any knowledge-producing inquiry must rely upon some cognitive values, e.g., truth, evidence, consistency. To abjure all interest-laden inquiry would require giving up on knowledge altogether. But even if we restrict the scope of the argument to noncognitive interests, the premise that knowledge requires interest-free inquiry is problematic, for substantive interests and values need not distort; instead, they may enhance our ability

to gain knowledge.²⁶ I believe that noncognitive values have a crucial role in the production of knowledge and cannot be eliminated, so I reject the premise that knowledge requires interest-free inquiry.

But more to the point, there are two separate issues here. To claim that socially situated inquiry can *capture* independent facts is not to claim that such inquiry gives us *knowledge* of the facts. It is possible to have true belief that is not knowledge. As I have just indicated, I believe that our inquiries often do provide knowledge of real distinctions and independent facts; but all I am claiming here is that the historical and social contingencies that affect our inquiries need not prevent us from forming true beliefs. No doubt some will see this as a leap from the frying pan into the fire, for in the context of these debates, any reference to “truth” is taken as problematic. In supposing that we can make sense of the notion of “truth” am I not supposing that there is a “ready-made world”? And doesn’t this beg the question?

Two points may be helpful here. First, in some contexts, it seems, to say that a statement is true is to claim for it the status of Absolute Truth or to commit oneself to the project of finding One Truth; or it is a claim to have found what is natural, or inevitable, or necessary. But in other contexts saying that a statement is true does not entail any such grandiose claims. It’s true that I just finished my mug of tea; it’s true that the tea bag is sitting wet and soggy at the bottom of the mug; it’s true that I’d love a refill. There is nothing absolute, inevitable, necessary, or epistemically privileged about these very mundane claims; they are, nonetheless, true. And it is this fairly ordinary notion of truth that I have in mind in considering whether the inevitable social conditions for inquiry prevent us from forming true beliefs.

Second, I do, in some sense of the term, believe in a “ready-made world.” As should be clear from the discussion above, however, this is not to say that the world hasn’t been profoundly affected by human activity; rather, it is to say that there are things in the world that satisfy our descriptions of them, without our having to “constitute” them in any sense through our cognitive efforts. (That is, our descriptions may have an impact on things, but they do so via the kinds of causal processes we’ve already considered in connection with discursive construction.) Does this commitment to such a world “beg the question”? Not in this context. My goal in working through the various forms of social construction is to determine if there is an argument for the claim that reality is socially constructed that requires us to revise the idea that there is such a “ready-made” world; thus, I unabashedly begin with the belief and evaluate the challenges to it. Because the project is to determine how effective arguments are against the belief, it need not be (in fact, should not be) suspended for the discussion. Admittedly, such burden-of-proof arguments are frustrating; but I hope it can be acknowledged that they have their place.

C. STRONG PRAGMATIC CONSTRUCTION

So it appears that without compromising the idea that there is an independent world, we can grant that reality is socially constructed in this sense: The distinction we draw between what's real and what's not is weakly constructed, i.e., social factors partly influence our efforts to describe the world. Is there any further reason this should lead us to be skeptical about there being a world independent of us? It might seem so if we could extend the case for pragmatic construction to show that the real-unreal distinction is *strongly pragmatically constructed*. Remember that a distinction is strongly pragmatically constructed if it is one whose purported applications are wholly determined by social factors and it fails to accurately represent "the facts." If there are arguments to show that the real-unreal distinction is constructed in this strong sense, then it would follow that our use of it is misguided and doesn't "capture" anything; what we take to be reality is simply a fiction. On this view, reality is socially constructed in the sense of being, like intrinsic coolness and "Woman's Nature," merely an illusion.

The question before us now is whether there are further considerations that should lead us from acknowledging the influence of social factors on knowledge to the more controversial suggestion that we should regard the notion of an "independent reality" as a fiction. For the purposes of this paper, I want to focus on a cluster of arguments aiming to show that the idea of a "reality" independent of us, sometimes called "objective" reality, is a kind of social projection. We are urged to conclude from these arguments that any meaningful sense of reality must be "perspectival," or "epistemically conditioned," and so we are not entitled to take a realist approach (however limited or modest) towards our classificatory schemes.²⁷

The broad strategy of the arguments in question is to suggest that because our efforts at describing, classifying, and understanding are inevitably influenced by social factors, we are misguided to think that we are in a position to accurately represent an "independent reality"; instead, the "reality" that presents itself as the (external) *object* of our epistemic efforts is actually better understood as a *product* of our efforts. (Think back to the example of "cool": Our apparent attributions of intrinsic or objective coolness turned out to be misguided; instead, we found that these attributions were better understood as concerned with the responses of a particular social group and that the object described was better understood as an artifact of our descriptive efforts.) Drawing on the distinctions we discussed earlier, the arguments invite us to reflect on the pragmatic construction of knowledge in order to recognize our role in the discursive and constitutive construction of reality.

I speak of a "cluster" of arguments, however, because the strategy involves two interdependent levels of argument. On the one hand, to show that "reality" is pragmatically constructed, we are asked to consider a broad

range of cases in which we attempt to describe the world. The goal is to demonstrate why in each case it is mistaken to understand our classificatory efforts on the model of sorting independently existing things, and to show how “reality” is being constructed rather than “mirrored” in our inquiry. Because a clear pattern develops in these examples, the question arises whether *all* of our seemingly “objective” classifications can be analyzed in the same way. If we could develop a critical method that would show the force of construction in all of our ordinary classifications and descriptions, this would lend credibility to the general metaphysical concerns about the notion of “reality” as such.

But this first level of argument can only be effective in challenging the general notion of reality if the chosen examples are paradigmatic, i.e., if our analysis of them could be plausibly extended to all of our efforts to describe the world. The second level of argument, however, targets the notion of reality more directly by asking us to consider the specific distinction between what counts as “real” and “unreal,” and what we might mean by speaking of an “independent reality.” The goal is to argue that when we call something ‘real’ we are not accurately describing, or even tracking, a world independent of us; instead, the designation ‘real’ functions like ‘cool’ simply to mark a socially meaningful fiction; and thus “reality” as we conceive it is an illusion. As we will see, this second level of argument focuses on a specific philosophical vision of what’s real and what’s not.

In the sections that follow, I begin by considering the substantive and controversial example of rape to determine the extent to which it might function as a model for unmasking the (strong) pragmatic construction of a wide range of substantive distinctions. I then turn to consider to what extent the distinction between real and unreal is pragmatically constructed. I’ll argue that the general strategy of challenging the notion of an independent reality by working from pragmatic construction fails at both levels, even though the example of rape is in significant respects compelling.

4. “MALE” REALITY

As suggested above, the first level of argument for the conclusion that reality is a strong pragmatic construction involves analyzing how social factors influence our descriptions of a wide range of phenomena. It is promising to begin by analyzing our use of concepts involving race, gender, class, or sexuality, but the goal is to develop a model that can apply across the board. So our task is to look at familiar and concrete cases: What is the actual basis for the divisions and distinctions we employ every day? Are any of these distinctions accurately mapping the world? Or are they systematically serving some other function?

It is a fairly common feminist claim that what is put forward as “objective” reality is rather “male” reality. One interpretation of this claim is that things are not actually designated ‘real’ by virtue of some objective or intrinsic fact about them but, rather, by virtue of their relation to “us,” where the “us” in question is a rather narrow class of white privileged males. (Think of the example of “cool” mentioned before—what’s cool is what “we” like, though masked as an intrinsic quality of the objects or individuals in question.) In defending this claim, the goal at this stage is to show how the various different classifications and categories we employ implicate men in some way. Although it is plausible that different cases will require different kinds of analysis, even with one case we can begin to evaluate whether the steps of the particular analysis are compelling and to what extent they can be generalized.

One of the most commonly discussed examples of the “male” construction of reality is rape, and one of the most compelling discussions is MacKinnon’s. Rape laws vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction (and there have been some important changes in rape law over the past two decades); nevertheless, there have been three relatively common aspects relevant to defining rape. First, the definition of rape centers around penetration; e.g., in traditional common law, “intercourse” or “carnal knowledge” was required, and contemporary law typically requires that there is “some penetration, however slight.”²⁸ Second, typically rape requires that the sexual act in question involve more than “the normal level of force.” And third, the woman must not have consented. But, as MacKinnon argues, each of these conditions are (at least as they are interpreted in practice) peculiarly male oriented. She points out:

The law to protect women’s sexuality from forcible violation and expropriation defines that protection in male genital terms. Women do resent forced penetration. But penile invasion of the vagina may be less pivotal to women’s sexuality, pleasure, or violation, than it is to male sexuality. This definitive element of rape centers . . . upon one way men define loss of exclusive access. In this light, rape, as legally defined, appears more a crime against female monogamy (exclusive access by one man) than against women’s sexual dignity or intimate integrity.²⁹

Further, to define the “normal level of force” beyond which something counts as rape, it is taken for granted that “normal” male sexuality involves some amount of force. So what counts to distinguish rape from “normal” sex is not the *victim’s* “point of violation” but rather what is socially accepted male sexual behavior. Finally, the standards for women’s presumed consent depend in important ways on their relationship to men; daughters, and, by extension, young girls and virginal women, are presumed not to consent, wives and prostitutes are presumed to consent (and in many cases there is no action that counts as registering their nonconsent).³⁰ The complexities of consent deepen when we note further that what matters in establishing a rape charge is whether

the perpetrator had reason to think that the woman was consenting, not whether she actually consented. So in considering whether an alleged rape was real, what seems to matter is what the event in question means to men and whether it is in their interest to view it as real. The example of rape seems to be a paradigm case in which the (legal?) distinction between what's real and what's not is being drawn from the point of view of a particular group.³¹

To further illustrate how men's point of view functions to define the terms we use, MacKinnon frequently mentions Justice Stewart's comment when asked to define obscenity. He said, "I know it when I see it."³² On her view, he's right in a way that he didn't realize, for something is obscene, not in itself, but by virtue of provoking certain responses in men; because Stewart experiences it as obscene, it is obscene, and he's in a position to know it. So on MacKinnon's analysis of masculinist practice, a rape counts as real, an obscene photograph counts as real, not "in itself" and not because some "reasonable person" would decide so given the facts, but due to how men respond to such events and such objects.

Reflecting on the rape example, it appears that the issue focuses on how we should define rape. Let's suppose the masculinist defines rape in terms of the three conditions mentioned (penetration, force, nonconsent) and maintains that whether or not a rape occurred must be determined by what a reasonable person would decide given all the facts. MacKinnon's discussion raises two objections. First, the accepted definition of rape is partial, because its implicit definition of sexual integrity is partial: It privileges men's responses to sexual situations and accommodates their needs, anxieties, and interests. And second, (she claims) there is no neutral or "objective" fact about what rape "really" is; and likewise, there is no neutral or objective point of view from which we can define rape. (Though on her view, there may be a non-neutral point of view—viz., a woman's point of view, or a feminist point of view, that we are entitled to draw upon in framing rape law.)

How do we employ the model of strong pragmatic construction in these sorts of cases; i.e., what is the illusion being projected onto the world? Here's a suggestion: Considering the legal conditions sketched above, one might try to define rape in two steps. The first step tries to capture a rather vague "common-sense" view of rape:

(R) X rapes y iff x and y have sex that violates y 's sexual integrity;

the second step tries to spell this out:

(SI) X and y have sex that violates y 's sexual integrity iff x and y have nonconsensual sex that involves the forced penetration of y 's vagina by x 's penis.

This two-step definition is clearly unacceptable, for by assuming that when sexual integrity is violated there is a penis and vagina involved, it is deeply

heterosexist; and in assuming that the violation is always of the one with the vagina, it is deeply sexist. But on MacKinnon's account there is an even deeper problem, for as suggested above, the definition undertakes to define sexual integrity in terms that merely reflect heterosexual men's desire for exclusive access to women's bodies. According to the proposed definition (and contrary to some appearances), a violation of women's sexuality is not defined in terms of women's desires or needs; instead it is defined by projecting onto women what violates heterosexual men's desire for sexual ownership.

The key here is to see that the legal understanding of "rape" is premised on an understanding of women's sexual integrity that is an illusion. Strictly speaking (SI) defines what *violates* women's sexual integrity, but clearly this account depends on assumptions about what *constitutes* women's sexual integrity; e.g., because the act of nonconsensual forced penetration is taken to be not only sufficient but also necessary for sexual violation, any sexual act other than this one is presumed compatible with women's sexual integrity. But this image of "Women's Sexual Integrity" is an illusion; in other words, the so-called "sexual integrity" implied by (SI) doesn't exist. Why not? Because at the very least if you listen to women talk about their experiences of sexuality, you'll find that they have a very different idea (and among them very different ideas) about what violates their sexual integrity—nonconsensual forced penetration might be part of it, but it surely isn't all. So if rape is defined by (R) and (SI) together, then rape too is a kind of illusion—one cannot violate something ("Women's Sexual Integrity" so-defined) that doesn't exist.

But of course we want to say that rape does exist, that rape *isn't* an illusion. How can we make this claim in the context of this analysis? In keeping with the analogy with "cool," MacKinnon's strategy does not allow us to claim that there is a "Real" essence of rape or obscenity that the common use of such terms [as in (R) and (SI)] misses. In other words, we're not to think that there is an "objective" fact—one that is independent of us and our self-interpretations—about what is rape and what isn't (just as we're not to think that there is an "objective" fact about coolness, independent of us and our self-interpretations). According to MacKinnon, rape isn't an *objective* fact, but neither is it an illusion; it is a fact of women's experience that must be understood from women's—or more accurately, a feminist—point of view. On this view, rape—and in turn, sexual integrity—can only be defined from a point of view; the question is, whose point of view counts? To use a slogan, rape is what rape means, sexuality is what sexuality means; the question is, to whom? And more generally, reality is what reality means; and again the question is, to whom?

Although these last questions are pressing and need well-thought-out answers, they are not directly on our topic; so I'm not going to offer even a tentative answer. Rather, the point of the example of rape is to explain what

it might mean to describe reality as “male” and, more generally, to illustrate how our classificatory practices and decisions about what to count as “real” can depend in crucial ways on a particular group’s responses and point of view (without it being obvious that they do). The example also shows how claims to map “objective” reality in setting up classification schemes can have disturbing political consequences, for the rhetoric of objectivity can serve to mask the privileging of the dominant group’s interests. In many contexts, the struggle to determine what’s real is in part a political fight about what relations to “us” count and about who is included in the “us.”

But it is unclear from this example what general conclusions we are entitled to draw concerning our classificatory efforts. Remember that the point of considering this example was to lend plausibility to the broader claim that reality *as a whole* is socially constructed in the strong sense of being, like “coolness,” a socially useful fiction. Can we extend the analysis of coolness, and now the masculinist understanding of rape, to other things? To everything?

5. CONSTRUCTED REALITY?

MacKinnon is emphatic that there is no objective reality and that reality is socially constructed in a strong sense. And yet, we have no clear indication how to generalize her analysis of rape to other concepts. On the face of it, this would seem a difficult task; e.g., are our concepts like ‘water’, ‘dog’, ‘tree’ to be understood in terms of the responses of particular groups or, more specifically, as defined from men’s point of view? Moreover, as the quote at the beginning of this paper about the bridge abutment demonstrates, MacKinnon is not ready to give up the notion of reality—even an independent reality—altogether. How should we interpret this? What is her notion of socially constructed reality?

Her view emerges from an analysis of practice. When the masculinist employs terms such as ‘rape’ or ‘obscene’ or, importantly for our purposes, ‘real’, he does so based on his own responses to things. But this is not a peculiarity of the masculinist. In general, whenever any of us speak of an object, we use criteria involving some relation that the object bears to us; when we call something \emptyset , we do so because of its place in our picture of things or its meaning from our point of view. However, if this is all we’re ever doing in calling things \emptyset , you might go further to claim that to *be* \emptyset must be just to have such a place in our picture. The guiding thought here is that because what we think or know about things is always conditioned by our particular social position, all we can ever meaningfully say about them is how they are related to that position. So although we sometimes appear to be talking about how things are “in themselves,” we’re actually only speaking of how things seem to us, i.e., of social facts.³³ From this, MacKinnon concludes that we

must give up the idea that our thought captures a “reality” with a “nonsocially perspectival” content;³⁴ more specifically she claims that “there is no ungendered reality or ungendered perspective.”³⁵ For, she asks, “What is a purely ontological category, a category of ‘being’ free of social perception?”³⁶

On this interpretation, MacKinnon is using the insight that social criteria govern our use of a given term \emptyset to debunk our “common-sense” idea of what it is to be \emptyset . Nothing is \emptyset “in itself”; rather to be \emptyset is to stand in some relation to us (a relation that may vary from case to case).³⁷ In terms we discussed above, all concepts (more specifically, all of our operative concepts) are constitutively constructed. She then uses this idea to challenge one understanding of an “independent” reality and to form an alternative conception of what it is to be real. If we mean by “independent reality,” the way things are “in themselves,” then, she argues, there is no way to speak of (or to think of, or to experience) a world that is “independent” of us, because the only world we can speak of is the one that is constituted through our perspective. However, in contrast, the real world, in any meaningful sense, is the world we speak of (think of, and experience); so, she concludes, we must learn to embrace in a general way the implication of perspective in what it is to be real.³⁸ In keeping with this, it is important to note that even though MacKinnon’s strategy works to unmask patriarchal concepts as reifying men’s interests and men’s point of view, her next step is *not* to aspire to concepts that are purged of all perspective. Instead, she urges us to endorse a feminist perspective, and with it, to constitute the world anew.

So on MacKinnon’s view, the masculinist and feminist worlds we constitute are in an important sense not independent of us, because we cannot eliminate and should not ignore the fact that they are constituted from and through perspectives; nonetheless, in perhaps another (and weaker) sense they are independent, for we are not demigods, and we do not create and control them—they may not be wholly independent of us, but we should not conclude that they are wholly dependent upon us either. As MacKinnon illustrated before, simply describing or naming something as, say, a bridge abutment cannot make it so. She resists realism, but she is also firmly opposed to any form of idealism; we cannot build a feminist world with thought alone, we need action as well.

There is much that is compelling about MacKinnon’s overall position—in particular, MacKinnon’s concern with the social and political factors in all knowledge is important; and she is right to claim that the meanings of some terms are irreducibly social. But the question is how far to extend these insights. Unfortunately, her argument for perspectival realities rests crucially on the dubious claim that because we only have a basis for classifying or describing something if it bears some relation to us, the content of our classifications inevitably captures those relations.³⁹ The problem is that even if we grant that the epistemic criteria for applying any term will implicate us

in some way, we need not equate such social *criteria* with the *content* of our attributions.⁴⁰ For example, the criterion we employ (and plausibly should employ) for judging whether something is water is how it looks and tastes; but to say that something is water is to classify it as a kind of liquid (i.e., as H₂O), where this classification concerns the composition of the liquid and not how it appears to us.⁴¹ In this case and in most others there is a clear contrast between the criteria for applying a concept and its content, and thus far we've been given no reason for thinking that a conflation of the two is necessary. In other words, social factors may play an unavoidable role in determining the ways we employ the concepts we do, but this is no reason for thinking that our concepts can't capture facts about the world as it is "in itself." On occasion we do get things right, sometimes due to luck, or other times hard work, or even insight.

In summary, MacKinnon's analysis of rape shows in detail how strong pragmatic constructions typically work: A particular group's interests and desires come to be projected onto the world in the service of some (often pernicious) social goal, where the supposed fact being represented is missing. For example, the masculinist projects his need for sexual ownership onto women and reads it as "Women's Sexual Integrity" (and not only expects women to live up to it but legally enforces it as well); but actual women's sexuality does not support his view of things.⁴² In such cases of projection, the social factors determining how we use our terms are masked, with the result that the projections are made to seem "objective," "natural," or "inevitable," when, of course, they aren't. But we must be careful before generalizing this model to all cases; sometimes social forces do affect how and why we view the world in a certain way, without preventing us from forming accurate beliefs about the world that exists beyond our perspective. Social forces (together with my own desires and interests) are responsible for my belief that right now the street outside my window is wet (it has been raining); but its wetness consists in properties of the pavement that have nothing to do with me or my conceptual repertoire. So MacKinnon's example and the argument developed from it do not offer us reason for thinking that reality as a whole is a strong pragmatic construction or that we should modify our understanding of an "independent" reality to grant that all reality is socially conditioned. What we *believe* to be real may be deeply conditioned by our point of view; but what *is* real is another matter.

6. "OBJECTIVE" REALITY

Even if MacKinnon's argument is not compelling, however, her discussion does leave some uncertainty about what to make of the idea of an *independent* reality. What does the idea amount to, and what work does it do for us?

In pressing these questions, we move to the second level of argument I mentioned earlier: Rather than using the first strategy of working to develop an analysis that debunks all of our efforts to describe the world, we instead focus attention directly on the distinction between real and unreal and on the concept of an independent reality. The worry is that if the real-unreal distinction *in particular* is constructed in the sense of being nothing more than a social projection, then we would have to conclude that there are no facts about what's real and what's not, and the idea of an independent reality would be a kind of fiction.

Let us begin again with the acknowledgment that all of our distinctions are weakly pragmatic—what ones we choose to employ and how we do so are at least partly determined by social factors; it follows that our use of the real-unreal distinction is weakly pragmatic. So the question before us now is whether there are further considerations which should lead us from acknowledging the influence of social factors on knowledge to the more controversial suggestion that we should regard the notion of an “independent reality” as a fiction. The following argument is one that can be found explicitly in some writers and is implicit in many others.⁴³ The general strategy was initially motivated as a critique of what is alleged to be a modernist picture of knowledge and reality, though the picture takes on a positive momentum of its own. (Whether it was actually endorsed by any modernist philosophers is a difficult historical issue I'm not going to get into.)

On the picture under attack, knowledge and reality are intimately connected: What is real is what can be objectively known.⁴⁴ Objectivity, on this view, is in its primary sense an epistemological notion. Roughly:

(ObInq) An inquiry is *objective* in the relevant sense just in case the way the world is and the rationality of the inquirers are the only factors that determine its outcome.

So, an objective view of some subject matter is one that a purely rational inquiry into the subject would eventually yield.⁴⁵ This epistemic notion of “objectivity” is then applied derivatively to ontology—as in “objective reality”—by virtue of the following equivalence:

(ObRel) An object or a fact is objectively real just in case it is (or can be) objectively known.

Moreover, on this view there is no notion of reality other than objective reality. (Note that this is only one of many accounts of objectivity; nevertheless, in the remainder of this section I will be using the term ‘objective’ as indicated here.)

At least in this crude formulation, such a conception of “objective” inquiry is not plausible, and it is now a commonplace to deny that such pure inquiry is possible. For (at least) the reasons sketched above, we must acknowledge

that the results of all human inquiry are conditioned by social factors.⁴⁶ But if we continue to think that reality must be equated with what is objectively knowable, then since nothing is objectively knowable (in the relevant sense), it appears that we should conclude that there is no such thing as “reality,” i.e., that nothing is objectively real. In short, “Reality” or “objective reality” is as much an illusion as “pure inquirers” and “objective knowledge.”

Having rejected the idea that there is an “objective reality,” however, it then seems plausible to offer an analysis of our purported references to what’s real in line with our previous example of “cool.” When we attribute “reality” to something, our attribution does not capture a fact about the object itself (since, by hypothesis, the fact we purport to be attributing is not available); rather such attributions correspond to a distinction in how things are related to us; in other words, things are graced with the term ‘real’ not by virtue of some intrinsic fact about them but by virtue of some relevant social fact, e.g., our finding them useful or, perhaps, politically expedient.⁴⁷ Yet, as in the case of “cool,” there is an illusion implicit in our attributions, since the background assumption is that what’s real is not a matter of how things are related to us but rather a matter of an intrinsic feature of things. This illusion is, of course, politically significant, for the distinction between what’s real and what’s not has important social consequences. As we’ve noted before, by masking our own contribution to what counts as real we mask the problematic political motivations for such discriminations and often cast them as natural or inevitable. So on this view we are to conclude that “objective reality” is an illusion masking the social factors that are actually responsible for the distinctions we draw between what’s real and what’s not.

7. BEING REAL

That’s the sketch of the argument; let’s now go through it a bit more carefully. We should note first that the argument is concerned with a particular practice of employing the terms ‘real’, ‘reality’, and their cognates; so far I’ve spoken vaguely about “our use” of the terms, but this is potentially misleading since it is unclear who the “we” are whose use is in question.⁴⁸ For the moment, let’s just call it the “objectivist use” of the terms, keeping in mind that we are analyzing a particular practice.

The objectivist use of the terms ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ involves both a discrimination between two classes of things (the class of things designated ‘real’ and those designated ‘unreal’) and an interpretation of the basis for that discrimination. In particular, the anti-objectivist argument is directed against those who apply the term ‘real’ rather narrowly, alleging to employ as their criterion whether it is possible to have objective knowledge of the

thing or not. Against this use of the term, the critical argument aims to show, first, that nothing satisfies the alleged criterion and, second, that there is really another criterion being employed in making the relevant discriminations, one that is grounded in certain responses to the things in question.

At this stage, I think we should grant that there's something wrong with an objectivist criterion for applying the term 'real' (viz., one requiring "objective knowledge"), so it is implausible that the classes of things the objectivist designates as 'real' and 'unreal' are being judged accurately by that standard, in spite of his belief that they are. The question is whether there is another criterion, or range of criteria, implicit in the objectivist's discriminations, and what they might be. Here the anti-objectivist will claim that there is always another criterion doing the work, and more specifically, it is one that draws on social facts or implicates "us" in some way (relating the object in question to our needs, interests, desires, social roles, etc.).

Of course, this statement of the point is rather vague, but exactly what social facts are relevant and how "we" are implicated varies depending on which anti-objectivist account you are considering—in MacKinnon's account we just discussed, male needs and interests are at the heart of the story. Moreover, what social factors determine how the terms are used may vary from context to context. But in spite of this vagueness, I think there is reason to be concerned about the whole strategy of argument.

Suppose we do grant that there are objectivist uses of the terms 'real' and 'reality' or, more generally, that there are ways of determining what is real and what isn't that purport to be epistemically objective but in fact are based on socially loaded criteria. This raises a challenge to the notion of an independent reality only if we accept the thesis that such a reality is *by definition* that which can be objectively known, i.e., only if we accept (ObRel) as characterizing what it is to be objectively (or independently) real. This is an easy thesis to reject, especially for one with realist inclinations; for the whole point of speaking of an *independent* reality is to emphasize that there is no necessary connection between what's real and what human beings know or can (in practice) know. Strangely, it appears that the argument as sketched would only be convincing to someone who was already committed to an epistemically constrained conception of reality and should not be convincing to those realists it purportedly sets out to target.

So there are several plausible responses to the argument that "objective reality" is an illusion. We could start by rejecting the most questionable premises: We could reject the proposed link between (objective) knowledge and (objective) reality, as stated in (ObRel). Or we could reject the proposed definition of objective knowledge in (ObInq). I find both of these options appealing. But suppose for the sake of argument that the only way to conceive of an "objective" reality is in terms of what is objectively known; i.e.,

suppose we decide to accept both of these premises. Then we probably should conclude that the correlative idea of reality is equally nonsensical.⁴⁹ However, even if we grant that there is no *objective* reality, it still doesn't follow that there is no *independent* reality or that there are no genuine facts of the matter that it would be good to know. To give up the idea of "objective reality," as we've been considering it, is simply to give up the idea that there are things which determine, in and of themselves, without any social factors playing a role, how they are known. It seems clear that because language and knowledge are socially conditioned, there are no things like this.

What's at least partly at stake here is how we want to employ the notion of "the real" or "reality." Assuming that the idea of an independent reality can only be defined in terms of objective knowledge grants too much to the objectivist. For as suggested above, at least one plausible idea of an "independent" reality is one that places no epistemic conditions on what it is to be real. At least initially, we might take the property of being real at face value: To be real is to exist. Or perhaps: For an object to be real is for it to exist; for an event to be real is for it to occur; for a fact to be real is for it to obtain. These explications are unilluminating to be sure and may well need further analysis; my point is not to endorse an intentionally naive view but rather to suggest the first steps of an account that views what's real in nonepistemological and nonsocial terms. We will, of course, need an epistemology (and I think a feminist epistemology) to help us decide what to believe exists, what definitions to accept, etc. But I see no good reason in the arguments we've considered so far to collapse the epistemology-ontology distinction. When I say that something is real, my assertion is true just in case the thing in question exists; this is so even if the criteria I employ in making the judgment are socially loaded and even if my utterance also expresses the value it has in my conception of things.

8. CONCLUSION

Are there any general conclusions we can draw from this discussion? How profoundly does the idea of social construction affect our projects in metaphysics and epistemology? There is no doubt that the idea of discursive construction should play a significant role in our ontological theorizing. Because reality does have a way of conforming itself to our conception of it, the line between artifacts and natural objects must continually be challenged and contested. We must be aware that the classifications we employ in our theorizing may not be capturing differences already there, but may be responsible for creating them. But we have no reason yet to conclude that there are only

artifacts or that our classificatory endeavors are so powerful as to leave nothing untouched.

Moreover, epistemologically, we must acknowledge the force of pragmatic construction. Our classificatory schemes, our distinctions, and our judgments are inevitably influenced by many different social factors; and some of our judgments are not tracking any facts but are instead only perpetuating socially meaningful illusions. Moreover, we must be attentive to the possibility that the terms we use are defined by and in the interest of dominant social groups. But from this it does not follow that the only function of judgment is the social one of perpetuating useful stories or that our judgment can only represent a social world. It may well be that our point of view on the world is always socially conditioned; but there is no reason to conclude that the world we have a point of view on is likewise socially conditioned. We must distance ourselves from the objectivist tendencies to limit our vision of what's real, but we must be careful at the same time not simply to accept perspectivist limitations in their place. I would propose that the task before us is to construct alternative, modestly realist, ontologies that enable us to come to more adequate and just visions of what is, what might be, and what should be.

NOTES

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2. For a diverse selection of texts that take up these claims, see, e.g., Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966); Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 1–19; Evelyn Fox Keller, "Making Gender Visible in the Pursuit of Nature's Secrets," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, 67; bell hooks, *Talking Back* (Boston: South End Press, 1989); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), esp. ch. 1.; Naomi Scheman, "From Hamlet to Maggie Verver: The History and Politics of the Knowing Subject," in her *Engenderings: Constructions of Knowledge, Authority, and Privilege* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 106–125; Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
3. See, e.g., Nancy Fraser on Foucault in her *Unruly Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3, 59–60.
4. This seems to be the conclusion drawn by radical social constructionists. See, for example, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (London: Sage, 1979).

5. Even Jane Flax, who embraces the postmodern critique of “the seductive tyranny of metaphysics, truth, the real,” claims later in the same essay that she is unwilling to “deny the existence of subjectivity or an ‘outer’ reality constituted in part by nontextual relations of domination” (Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 189, 219). Donna Haraway is another who is clear that we must find a way to embrace the social construction of knowledge together with “a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world”; see Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in her *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), esp. 187.
6. Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 123. See also her *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 57.
7. A good place to begin in considering recent uses of the phrase ‘social construction’ is Berger and Luckmann, op. cit.; for a recent survey of uses of the term, especially in the sociology of knowledge, see Sergio Sismondo, “Some Social Constructions,” *Social Studies of Science* 23 (1993): 515–53.
8. Whether, ultimately, social construction should be understood in terms of artifacts is controversial; in particular, the suggestions that artifacts require agents to produce them and that artifacts invite a matter-form analysis have been targeted as problematic. See, e.g., Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), ch. 1.
9. In the context of psychology, the claim is often more specific, viz., that our own self-attributed gender, or gendered sense of self, is a result of social forces and is not biologically determined. In the feminist literature, one finds the term ‘gender identity’ being used in different ways, e.g., sometimes for the psychological phenomenon of self-ascribed gender, sometimes for one’s gendered characteristics more broadly, and sometimes for the social category one has been ascribed to.
10. A significant amount of feminist work over the past two decades has been concerned with gender as a social category. For important examples, see Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–1075; Donna Haraway, “‘Gender’ for a Marxist Dictionary,” in her *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. See also, Sally Haslanger, “On Being Objective and Being Objectified,” in Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt, eds., *A Mind of One’s Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), esp. secs. 2 and 4; and Linda Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism,” *Signs* 13 (1988): 405–436, esp. 433–36.
11. A “social constructivist” approach to a given domain is typically set in opposition to an “essentialist” approach. Because there are different senses in which things are socially constructed, it is not surprising that the term “essentialism” also has a variety of uses. For example, those who are concerned to assert social construction as a causal thesis about the social origins of certain traits or capacities tend to interpret the opposing essentialism as a commitment to biological determinism; however, in contexts where constructionists are postulating a social category, essentialism is usually taken to be the view that all members of the category share some (intrinsic?) feature(s). Both of these “essentialisms” are different from the kind of modal (or Aristotelian) essentialism discussed in contemporary analytic metaphysics.
12. I intend this definition of constitutive construction to be applicable to objects, kinds of objects, properties, or concepts. Some may find it puzzling that I speak of defining objects and features of objects, since contemporary philosophers have often insisted that terms or concepts are the (only) proper subjects of definition. I take it, however, that the seeming unanimity on this point is breaking down, and I want to allow broad flexibility in the notion of constitutive construction. See Kit Fine, “Essence and Modality,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 8 (1994): 1–16.
13. No doubt with time the term “cool” will come to seem awkward and dated as an honorific; such changes in the terminology used to establish social groups are inevitable. If the

- reader finds “being cool” no longer socially desirable, substitute in the examples whatever term currently functions in its place.
14. Ian Hacking explicitly mentions such a “feedback loop” in “The Sociology of Knowledge about Child Abuse,” *Nous* 22 (1988): 55. See also Ian Hacking, “The Making and Molding of Child Abuse,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1990/91): 253–88.
 15. Note that a discourse, and so discursive construction, will involve more than spoken language. See Nancy Fraser, “The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics,” in Nancy Fraser and Sandra L. Bartky, eds., *Revaluing French Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 177–194. For a clear explanation of one feminist appropriation of Foucault’s notion of “discourse,” see, also, Joan Scott, “Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: or, The Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988): 33–50.
 16. The claim that adult human beings are artifacts allows that we are constructed from “natural” materials—e.g., flesh and blood—though this would seem to presuppose a clear distinction between the natural and the social. For helpful discussions questioning feminist uses of this distinction, see Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1983), 34–37; Moira Gatens, “A Critique of the Sex-Gender Distinction,” in J. Allen and P. Patton, eds., *Beyond Marxism? Interventions after Marx* (Sydney: Interventions Publications, 1983); and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, esp. ch. 1.
 17. Note that I do not mean to equate “intrinsic” with “objective” features. Intrinsic features are, roughly, those that an object has “by virtue of itself alone”; i.e., they are nonrelational properties. In this context we can take objective features to be (very roughly) those that an object has independently of its representation by an inquiring subject. At the very least, not all objective features are intrinsic; e.g., *orbiting the sun* is an extrinsic or relational property of the earth that is plausibly objective. The earth orbits the sun or doesn’t, independently of what we think about it. Note that, in the examples below, I assume that in attributing “coolness” to someone we are suggesting that they have an *intrinsic* quality of coolness. I’m now not convinced that this is right, because the attribution of coolness seems to allow that there are some relational features relevant to someone’s being cool, e.g., owning an electric guitar; instead it may be that what’s at issue is the “objectivity” of coolness—we suggest that coolness has nothing to do with our representations, when in fact it does. For ease of presentation, I’ve focused on intrinsicness in the examples, though a more complete discussion would have to show greater sensitivity to the particular nuances of “cool.”
 18. Though if I am successful and there is solidarity in the cohort, we may come to act alike, dress alike, value similar things, etc., and this can provide substantive content to the notion of “coolness”; eventually there may be a genuine (intrinsic) difference between the cool and uncool. For an up-to-date sample of who’s and what’s *really* cool, you can contact the “Who’s Cool in America Project” through the World Wide Web at: <http://www.attisv.com/~getcool/index.shtml>. You can even submit an application stating why you think you are cool, and a “CoolBoard” determines whether you are.
 19. As will become clear in what follows, this characterization of strong pragmatic construction is oversimplified, even misleading, in its suggestion that in the relevant cases social concerns *wholly* determine our use of the distinction. In the case of “cool,” because our use tracks *some* real distinction (status with respect to the in-group), facts about individuals we label “cool dudes” matter to whether we apply the term (e.g., whether they dress a certain way, behave a certain way, etc.). What I’m trying to capture, however, is the fact that our usage is not being guided by some actual property of individuals that corresponds to the intended content (intrinsic coolness) and that what property (or properties) substitutes for it is determined by social concerns. In terms I introduce below, we could say that what operative concept substitutes for the manifest concept is determined wholly by social factors. Let me also emphasize that by labelling the different forms of pragmatic construction “weak” and “strong” I do not intend to imply that the more socially motivated a distinction, the less real; we have very strong social reasons for marking certain real distinctions.

20. Others will likely question whether I've made a genuine assertion at all, and still others may suggest that I've said something true but misleading. The issues that arise here parallel debates over antirealism and realism in other domains; in effect I am proposing here an "error theory" about coolness, where others might endorse a realism or noncognitivism (though shortly I will modify this view somewhat). But this is a debate we need not settle here. For a general discussion of the alternatives, see Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Introduction: The Many Moral Realisms," in his *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); and Paul Boghossian, "The Status of Content," *Philosophical Review* 99 (1990): 157–84.
21. See John Dupré, *The Disorder of Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), ch. 1.
22. Haslanger, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified."
23. See Ian Hacking, "Making Up People," in Thomas Heller, Morton Sosna, and David Wellberg, eds., *Reconstructing Individualism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986), 222–36.
24. See Sismondo, op. cit., 524. Note that for this reason more radical social constructivists, especially those in science studies concerned with the construction of scientific objects, may be wary of seeing causal construction as a genuine type of social construction.
25. One might argue that even here I am working with too narrow an understanding of causal construction. Harking back to the concerns of nineteenth-century philosophy, the claim that the world is a social artifact can seem to have a transcendental ring. In particular it suggests that there is a transcendental agent (whether it be a "transcendental ego" or some transcendental notion of "society" or "language") that is not a part of nature but nevertheless is causing, producing, or otherwise constituting the natural world in a rather special way. But this transcendental conception of an "artifact" is no longer believable; whatever worries one might have about the idea of "nature," it is clear that there are no such transcendental agents "outside of" or "prior to" nature. Surely groups of embodied human animals are not such agents, nor are the spoken languages of such animals. We finite beings are not doing the work of constituting the entire inanimate world. And if we aren't doing it, no one else is. Here I am intending to situate myself within a tradition of mild naturalism: We are embodied beings functioning as an integral part of the world, as are our minds, and our languages, and our social systems. This mild naturalism is not only a familiar background assumption in contemporary philosophy but also functions as the background for many of the feminist critiques of earlier philosophical projects. Although there are vestiges of transcendental epistemology in some postmodern and feminist epistemologies, I take it that these are problematic aspects of those projects and should be avoided.
26. See, e.g., Elizabeth Anderson, "Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology," this journal, this issue; and Alison Wylie, "Doing Philosophy as a Feminist: Longino on the Search for a Feminist Epistemology," this journal, this issue.
27. I put the epistemic qualifications on reality in scare-quotes to indicate that they are intentionally left vague at this point—what exactly they mean is controversial and often obscure. I will elaborate on at least one interpretation in discussing MacKinnon's view below. In this paper I'll use the term 'realist' roughly as follows: A "minimal realist" with respect to a domain of discourse is one who takes some of the statements in that domain to express truths; an "ontological realist" (usually referred to simply as a "realist") believes that some truths obtain independently of our conceptual or representational activities. Needless to say, these characterizations are vague, and the notion of "independence" I am relying upon needs further explanation, but this is not work I can do here. Note, however, that it is not my view that only things that are "independently" real are real; I only claim that some things that are real are "independently" real.
28. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 295 n. 2. Some states have revised the definition of "intercourse" or "sexual conduct" used in rape law to include oral and anal penetration; Michigan law includes "any other intrusion, however slight, of any part of a person's body or of any object into the genital or anal openings of another person's

body" (quoted in Susan Estrich, *Real Rape* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987], 83). Note, however, that penetration or "intrusion" is still required; so the question remains: Why is sexual assault that involves penetration or "intrusion" considered worthy of special treatment? Are there not acts that from a woman's point of view would be experienced as more sexually violating than some penetrations?

29. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 172.
30. Ibid., 175.
31. It is important to note that on MacKinnon's view, one's "point of view" is not the same as one's experience or perception. For example, rape law may be framed from the "male point of view" even if there are many men who do not experience the desire for sexual ownership. What matters is whether the law is framed to accommodate the needs and interests of those who excel in the social position defined for men; those who do excel in this social position will typically have internalized the norms, and so will have the associated experience, e.g., the desires, anxieties, etc.
32. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 90, 147; *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 196–7.
33. It may seem odd to think of the fact in question as a "social fact," for after all, when I describe or classify something, I do so on the basis of how the thing in question relates to *me*, and whatever the relation between myself and the object may be, it isn't obviously a *social* relation. (Though what counts as a "social relation" is far from clear.) However, the criteria I employ are social in the sense that the application-conditions for any term are socially, not privately, specified; so in claiming that I can only speak of how things seem *from here*, what counts as "here" is not the individual consciousness but, rather, the social context that determines meanings.
34. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 83.
35. Ibid., 114.
36. Ibid., 119.
37. Looking closely, we can see that MacKinnon's position develops in two steps: First, allow that any meaningful *criteria* for employing a term will always implicate us; e.g., the criteria will involve reference to conditions under which the thing in question normally appears *to us* or is meaningful *to us*. Then, second, treat the criteria for employing a term as its *meaning* or *intension*; i.e., equate the epistemic basis for our attributions with the property we are attributing. As stated, both steps apply to all terms, but they have the particular result that the property we are attributing to something in saying that it is real is a kind of social property: To be real is always to be real to someone, to some group, or from some point of view. Although in this analysis the reference to some "us" or other is ineliminable, in saying what is real we nevertheless capture genuine social facts concerning "us."
- I'm relying here on some distinctions that have functioned implicitly in the discussion so far. In applying any term, there are several things at issue: First, there is the class of things to which the term applies, i.e., the *extension* of the term. (Here we might note a further difference between the class of things to which the term truly or accurately applies and the class to which it purportedly applies in a given pattern of use; so we might distinguish the extension from the *purported extension*.) Second, there are the properties attributed to the things in so distinguishing them, i.e., the *intension* of the term. (With the distinction between manifest and operative concepts in mind, we might also want to distinguish the intension from the *purported intension*.) And third, there is the *criterion* by which we judge whether something falls into the class or not. A criterion for use is an epistemic notion concerning those conditions under which we do (or should) apply the term. (Note that the notion of a criterion has both a descriptive and normative use.)
38. MacKinnon is concerned that her view not be dismissed as relativism. She does not allow that each group's determination of what is real is equally good or that it doesn't matter which "reality" we adopt. It is a political matter what "reality" we adopt and so take as a basis for our actions; in effect, different points of view generate competing realities, and

to decide between them is to take a moral stand. MacKinnon's own moral stand is unequivocal; she proposes that we stop acting on the basis of what is real *to men* and instead begin to take seriously what is real *to women*. More specifically, we should adopt the point of view of feminism ("unmodified") and accept (and work to create) the reality it endorses. This is not "women's reality" in the sense of what females think; one might say that it is a feminist standpoint which does not claim greater objectivity than other standpoints but which claims our allegiance on the basis of its contribution to gender equality. (See also note 31.)

39. There are reasons for questioning my interpretation of MacKinnon's argument, specifically its attribution to her the belief that we must understand the content of a term in terms of the criteria for its use. There is some evidence in her work that, for reasons similar to Rorty's, she rejects a representationalist epistemology; if so, I'm not sure how, if at all, the content of a term would be determined. For an excellent discussion of MacKinnon's epistemology, see Elizabeth Hackett, "Catharine MacKinnon's 'Feminist Epistemology,'" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1996). Drawing on parallels with Rorty and Kuhn, Hackett's interpretation offers MacKinnon a much more sophisticated position than I can do justice to here.
40. Admittedly, it is not uncommon to find authors conflating the criterion for the application of a term and the meaning of a term. (This is not surprising since much of what we say on these matters is ambiguous: In considering what is the *basis for* the application of a term, it is often unclear whether we are inquiring into the truth conditions or the evidential basis.) But for the most part, the conflation of criteria and truth conditions is a mistake.
41. Ironically, there are echoes of verificationism in MacKinnon's epistemology, for at least in the argument just considered, she needs to equate the meaning of a term with our methods for determining when it applies.
42. My use of the masculine pronoun here should not mislead, for it is important to allow that women can take up a masculinist perspective and so come to think about their own sexual integrity and other women's in masculinist terms. The contradictions between what women learn to think about themselves and what they actually experience are often a source of confusion, pain, and struggle. Whether or not there is a way to define "women's sexual integrity" or "women's experience" that includes all women is a highly contested issue; MacKinnon is often labeled (and dismissed) as "essentialist" for seeming to suggest that there is. But note that MacKinnon's project is primarily negative—living in a masculinist world, she is undertaking to show that whatever we might come to see as women's experience(s) or women's point(s) of view, *it isn't this*.
43. My characterization of the argument is much simplified, but I have in mind works such as Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979); Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, esp. ch. 6; Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp. ch. 6; and others.
44. For one typical characterization of the objectivist target, see MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 97.
45. See Gideon Rosen, "Objectivity and Modern Idealism," in M. Michael and J. O'Leary-Hawthorne, eds., *Philosophy in Mind* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 277–319. Rosen's paper offers an excellent discussion of the problems that arise in even framing a notion of objective reality.
46. Of course there may be subtleties to add to the formulation so that the kinds of social factors mentioned don't prevent an inquiry from being objective; and it may be that such a crude view was never actually held by anyone. But historical accuracy is not my concern here, since the point is to capture what's motivating the broad-scale anti-objectivist.
47. See, e.g., MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 173: "The object world is constructed according to how it looks with respect to its possible uses."

48. E.g., it is unclear whether it is supposed to be philosophers (modernist or otherwise), judges, or the person on the street who supposedly uses the terms precisely as sketched. It might also be that the use in question is one that few people are entirely consistent about and that, instead, it tends to accompany certain roles.
49. This, I take it, is sometimes Rorty's view. See, e.g., Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of Language," in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3–22.