Resisting Reality

Social Construction and Social Critique

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"analytically true" = it's true, in a simple and straight-forward way, because of the meaning of the key words considered in themselves.

It is still commonly assumed and asserted in philosophy that: it is analytically true by virtue of the meaning of 'bachelor' that:

person "x"

x is a *bachelor* iff$_{df}$ *x* is an unmarried adult male (UAM). "by definition, if"

But this claim only seems plausible if one assumes that heterosexuality is universal, or that there is no way other than marriage for one to enter into a formalized lifelong commitment. It seems plausible to say that an unmarried gay man who has made a lifelong commitment to another—perhaps even formalized it as a "civil union"—is not a bachelor. (So not: if UAM, then bachelor.) To press further: is it analytic that marriage is between a man and a woman, or is it only "deeply embedded collateral information" (Putnam 1975a, p. 41)? Whose intuitions about 'marriage' should settle this?

"So the following statement isn't true: 'if x is an unmarried adult male, then x is a bachelor'."

One might suggest that a weaker claim is analytic by virtue of the meaning of 'bachelor':

If *x* is a *bachelor*, then x is unmarried.

But the truth of this claim depends on what sorts of institutions might qualify as 'marriage,' and this is an issue that is highly contested and historically complex. For example, marriage as we know it has traditionally combined an economic institution with a quasi-religious institution setting constraints on sexual behavior. This is, of course, not an accident, since sex tends to produce offspring and offspring are, at least potentially, both an economic drain and an economic resource. However, it is possible to imagine a case in which the economic institution of marriage and the sexual institution of marriage are separated to form two kinds of marriage, a sexual marriage and an economic marriage. (Consider, perhaps, a variation on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's*

Tale.) Further, suppose that one can be sexually married to *A* and economically married to *B*. I'm inclined to think that bachelorhood is really about sexual availability, so the fact that a man is economically married to *A* does not compromise his bachelor status, since he is still available to be sexually married to someone else.

In any case, the reliance on a background social framework is apparent in the case of:

> *x* is a *parent* iff$_{df}$ *x* is an immediate progenitor.

In some social/historical contexts this may seem analytically true by virtue of what 'parent' means. But laws and customs change so that one can become the legal parent of a child who is not biologically related, and with time, such parents are recognized as 'real parents.'

Something is "essential" to x if it's necessarily true about x; if it weren't true, x wouldn't be x.

Something is "accidental" to x if it happens to be true about x but, if it weren't true, then x would still be x.

In the case of *parents* and of *marriage* there are competing models of social life, of what's essential and what's accidental to our existing social structures. But just as what is essential or accidental to being an atom or being energy will depend on the background physical theory in which the term 'atom' is used, so what is essential or accidental to being a parent, or being married, or being a bachelor, will depend on the background model of social life (see also Burge 1986). Putnam suggests that we should contrast cases such as "Bachelors are unmarried men" with scientific principles, because the former is as close to pure stipulation as we can get and the latter have "systematic import." Because of the systematic import of scientific principles, we can give up one or another of them without changing the meaning of the terms used to express them. (Putnam 1975a, p. 40) What Putnam (and others) seem to miss is that "Bachelors are unmarried men" also has systematic import; that is, the concepts, in particular, of *marriage, adult*, and *male,* although familiar from common parlance, can also be the subject of social and political theory and of social contestation. Although the scientific essentialists were apt to claim that the analytic/synthetic distinction stood in the way of scientific progress, they were not as apt to see that it may also stand in the way of social progress.

What these cases reveal is that often what we take to be analytic principles actually encode certain social arrangements, and the relationship between terms encode certain power structures. For example, the term 'parent' brings with it a certain normative weight, entitlement, and so on, that the term 'primary caregiver' doesn't. Putnam suggests that it would be difficult to imagine a physical theory that did not employ some notion of *the past*, or of *energy*. These are framework concepts. Similarly it is difficult to imagine a social theory that did not employ some notions of *male, female, parent*, even something like *marriage*. So there is a reason why social constructionists want to rethink the term 'parent' rather than substituting the term 'primary caregiver.' And it is not surprising that in the United States we are fighting over *what the term 'marriage' means* as

part of the struggle for gay rights. The term 'marriage' is a framework concept that links the institution to a broad range of other social phenomena, and does so in a way that 'civil union' cannot approximate.

The constructionist about 'parent' maintains that in cases where the manifest concept of *parent* is of an immediate progenitor, it may nonetheless be appropriate to understand the concept of *parent* as of *primary caregiver* (or some such notion). Is the constructionist simply changing the meaning of the term? If the concept of *parent* is a (social) framework concept, which seems plausible, and if the work we need the term 'parent' to do is no longer best served by assuming that parents are immediate progenitors, then it is reasonable to consider this claim, not as giving the meaning of the term, but as stating a useful, though not universal, generalization.

This, then, suggests a reason to prefer the constructionist to the error-theoretic strategy in analyzing at least some social kinds. The conceptualist's insistence that the concept in question, say *parent,* should be analyzed only in terms of what is manifest to us, can have the effect of fossilizing our social structure: if we are not allowed to adjust the contents of our framework concepts in light of developments in social theory and social life, then social change will require a wholesale adoption of a new conceptual scheme. Given that this is unlikely, change will be difficult. Moreover, because framework concepts are embedded with normative principles, rejecting the concepts may leave us with old practices and no new principles to guide us. If we combine the conceptualist strategy with the retention of purportedly natural categories, we further entrench the existing framework by suggesting that its analytic structure is just tracking nature's joints, not ours. So, in effect, the constructionist is making two moves that potentially destabilize our social arrangements: revealing that a purportedly analytic statement is in fact a contingent generalization, and revealing that a natural category is in fact social.