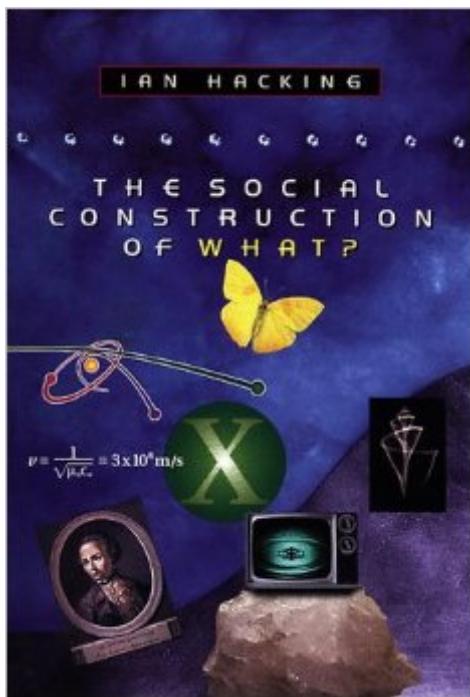


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The Social Construction Of What?



Synopsis

Lost in the raging debate over the validity of social construction is the question of what, precisely, is being constructed. Facts, gender, quarks, reality? Is it a person? An object? An idea? A theory? Each entails a different notion of social construction, Ian Hacking reminds us. His book explores an array of examples to reveal the deep issues underlying contentious accounts of reality. Especially troublesome in this dispute is the status of the natural sciences, and this is where Hacking finds some of his most telling cases, from the conflict between biological and social approaches to mental illness to vying accounts of current research in sedimentary geology. He looks at the issue of child abuse--very much a reality, though the idea of child abuse is a social product. He also cautiously examines the ways in which advanced research on new weapons influences not the content but the form of science. In conclusion, Hacking comments on the "culture wars" in anthropology, in particular a spat between leading ethnographers over Hawaii and Captain Cook. Written with generosity and gentle wit by one of our most distinguished philosophers of science, this wise book brings a much needed measure of clarity to current arguments about the nature of knowledge.

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Customer Reviews

The Social Construction of What? marks Ian Hacking's first book-length foray into the pitched battle over the nature and status of the natural, medical and social sciences. It's a truly stunning work: elegant, analytical, insightful. It also represents a useful introduction to the various themes which characterise the collected work of arguably the greatest living philosopher of the Western world. For

the most part I endorse the thoughtful review sent in by the reader from London. I want to make a gentle amendment to her/his careful characterisation of the book. I'm not so sure that Hacking is 'Clearly on the side of the constructionists'. To put it thus is, of course, a useful corrective to the absurd implications of Daniel Johnson's review of this book in the New York Times Book Review. There Johnson tries to portray Hacking as sharing Johnson's own contempt for social constructionists, which Hacking clearly does not. But I see Hacking as doing something more than simply siding with one group against the other. In this book Hacking carefully disentangles the various arguments being made by both parties in the culture/science 'wars'. Unlike those who indulge in knee-jerk scepticism about constructionism (a.k.a., many believe, 'postmodernism'), he finds much of value in the consciousness-raising motivations of social constructionists. He also applauds their attention to historical detail and their treatment of intellectual/theoretical pursuits like the natural and social sciences as ongoing social activities, with important, often unintended effects on our everyday lives. On the other hand, Hacking suspects that much of the current vogue for the language of social construction is simply a case of bandwagon-jumping, and explicitly states that he has seldom found that language useful in his own work. He does not hesitate to expose certain claims made by both sides as 'tomfoolery', but is careful in so doing to point out that there is an important kernel of insight in the reasoning of thinkers as starkly at odds as Steven Weinberg and Bruno Latour. As Hacking makes clear in his chapter on the natural sciences, there are important intuitions buried in the metaphysical convictions of scientists and constructionists. When it comes down to putting his money where his mouth is, Hacking's self-evaluation puts his own commitments squarely in the middle. He scores himself a 2, 3 and 4 out of 5 on the three 'sticking-points' that are at the heart of the disagreement over social construction in the sciences. But is Hacking just sitting on the fence? I don't think so; in fact, I think he offers us a third way, so to speak. You get a taste of this third way in his discussions of 'interactive kinds', 'forms of knowledge', 'styles of reasoning', 'self-vindication', 'making up people', 'looping effects', and other unfamiliar concepts. These make up part of Hacking's own attempt to grapple with human knowledge, and they are subsumed by neither social constructionism nor mainstream analytic philosophy -- which isn't to say he hasn't drawn a lot from both. A word to the prospective reader: be careful when interpreting Ian Hacking. His clear and polished prose can be deceptive. His own views are so sophisticated and fine-grained that it is easy to pigeon-hole him into irrelevant categories. But don't let that stop you from reading him yourself -- with some patience, you will find your efforts well rewarded.

One of the things Hacking has taken from Wittgenstein is his aversion to grand theory-making in

philosophy. Unlike some philosophers, Hacking has learned from mistakes of the past and is not doomed to repeat them. Those who want grand, clear-cut theories in their philosophy are liable to be frustrated by the present book, and come up short in their interpretations of it (see the reviews in the Economist and the NY Times Book Review, for example). It's not that Hacking does not have a position, it's just that, as the reviewer from New York wrote, his distinctions are finely-spun and less subtle minds may have trouble getting a grip on them. Hacking is too humane and takes the world, people, and people's coping far too seriously to be glib about things (*pace* the one-star reviewer below). Indeed, his writings, from the earlier books on probability and scientific realism to his paper on "Styles of reasoning" and his later books on psychiatric issues, can all, I think, be illuminated by the rubric "how to take imperfect knowledge seriously". Those rare science warriors, on either side of the debate, who polemically espouse the perfection of their cause will therefore be disappointed.

For the rest of us, Hacking's careful commentary on the issue comes like a gust of fresh air.

Hacking really admires science, and he understands it pretty well, too. But remember the rubric: "taking imperfect knowledge seriously". Hacking certainly doesn't think that all that's true and can be said about science is said by science or dogmatic scientists themselves. Some of the social constructionists have exposed important if imperfect historical truths, too. Those who are interested in broader debates on social constructionism will certainly profit from this book. I will not say more, as I think the reviewers from New York and London have summed things up well. Although this book is topical and has a nice, shiny cover, I will say that if you are mainly interested in getting acquainted with Hacking's style of philosophy, one of his earlier books will serve you better.

Representing and Intervening is probably your best bet. One more thing: while Hacking is serious, as the reviews suggest, he can also be extremely funny, if in a dry way. Hacking's books, unlike some philosophy, are a joy to read.

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