Revisiting "Non-Inevitability" in Social Construction

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Winner of the Glenn Joy Award

I analyze to what extent vagueness surrounding the meaning of "non-inevitability" affects the theoretical cogency and practical efficacy of social constructionist programs. My task is successful if it can explain, organize, and clarify how this issue affects social constructionist programs and ameliorative versions of social constructionist programs especially. Very roughly, descriptive social constructionists ask "What is X?" or "In virtue of what social factors is X constituted?" Given issues of social justice in particular, ameliorative social constructionists ask "What should X be?" or "How should we alter our conception of X?" I propose that the claim of "non-inevitability" on the part of social constructionists has not been adequately justified: Its meaning has not been made precise or relies too heavily on intuitions about what is social/natural, unnecessary/necessary, and alterable/inalterable. To then defend and bolster social constructionist programs, I propose two understandings of "non-inevitability," which, though somewhat course-grained are not thereby merely half-baked. The understandings I recommend are both more substantive and precise than what has so far been offered in existing literature.

According to Hacking (1999), social constructionists about X usually hold that:

(0) In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted, X appears to be inevitable (12).

(1) X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at

present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable (6).

They often go further and argue that:
(2) X is quite bad as it is.
(3) We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed (6).

Hacking's presentation of the employment of "non-inevitability" by social constructionists is vague. André Kukla (2000) expounds upon this same theme in *Social Constructivism and the Philosophy of Science*. As Kukla notes, Theses (2), (3), and (0) elucidate "the point" of social constructionist claims rather than their meaning (2). This is to say that Hacking's Theses (0), (2), and (3) and are not critical prerequisites for descriptive social constructionist claims, though they are, I propose, for ameliorative or emancipatory versions. However, Thesis (1) *is* a necessary condition for the truth of the claim that "X is socially constructed." For Hacking and most social constructionists, "X is socially constructed" entails that X is not inevitable (Kukla 2). To put the point differently, according to Hacking's understanding of Thesis (1), a necessary condition for the validity of social constructionist claims (i.e., that "X is socially constructed") entails that "X is not inevitable" and vice versa. Yet, X's being socially constructed does not fully define "non-inevitability" nor does "non-inevitability" fully define the meaning of "socially constructed." While Kukla does not proffer, nor does he take as his primary goal to proffer, an amended account of the meaning of "non-inevitability" in the context of social constructionist programs, I take this as my main task in what follows.

Making clearer what inevitability amounts to is important since what establishes X's non-inevitability, and indeed, whether X is or is not non-inevitable, is often precisely what is in question between social constructionists and their opponents (and even among social constructionists as well). Stated as it is, Thesis (1) offers no criteria to delimit the inevitable from the non-inevitable and the natural or non-social from the social. It is the criteria that decides these matters that is part of what is at issue between advocates and opponents of social constructionism, as well as among some social constructionists themselves. Thus, I attempt to make clearer the various ways in which the claim of X's non-inevitability might be understood. I also present what I take to be Thesis (1)'s most promising interpretations, which I name the "Dependence Reading" and the "Alterability Reading" respectively. While not entirely fine-grained, I see the two readings I advocate, whether taken individually or together, as offering a substantive account of non-inevitability that, as a matter of course, is more metaphysically and logically cogentl as well as more politically and practically useful.

I begin by way of elucidating what I call the "Extremist Reading" of Thesis (1), a reading I take to be largely implausible. I do so to underscore this reading's inadequacies with the larger goal of showing, later in this paper, how the Dependence or Alterability Readings might avoid them. On the Extremist Reading, Thesis (1) means that X is not inevitable in the sense that everything might be non-inevitable - for example, most extremely, perhaps there need not have been something rather than nothing. The problem with this reading is that everything (including everything physical or part of the empirical world) is not inevitable, including the obviously non-social (e.g., planets, evergreens, sloths). It might be that only such things as mathematical or logical truths are inevitable in this sense, though I will not discuss this possibility further. The Extremist Reading shows that the distinctive feature of social constructions cannot be that they are not inevitable in this sense. Nevertheless, expounding upon this reading is valuable as it reveals that "natural" should not be understood as necessarily coextensive with "inevitable" and that "socially-constituted/caused" should not be understood as necessarily coextensive with "non-inevitable."

I now turn to the Dependence Reading, a more plausible understanding of Thesis (1). On this interpretation, the claim of inevitability on the part of social constructionists is a claim about what features are central to X's existence. To claim that some phenomenon X is not inevitable is to think of it in terms of its degree of dependence on social phenomena. Understood this way, non-inevitability falls on a spectrum. Thus, the more dependent X is upon social factors, the more X is not inevitable. There is, then, no hard and fast distinction between the inevitable and the non-inevitable. Rather, at one end of the spectrum are those phenomena that are more directly a result of biological or other physical features, and hence, relatively independent of social phenomena. Moving along the continuum are phenomena that are more dependent on other social factors. Non-inevitability increases, for example, as one moves from kinship structures (phenomena highly dependent upon biological features) to marriage (a pervasive cross-cultural phenomenon), to such phenomena as engagement rituals, the wearing of a ring on a given finger, bachelor and bachelorette parties, and wedding/bridal showers. To reiterate, the less X is the result of non-social factors (the less causally or constitutively dependent X is upon social factors), the more X is inevitable, and the more X is a feature of, or parasitic upon, social practices or features, the less X is inevitable. We can know, therefore, that marriage is more non-inevitable than kinship structures since without the latter, there would not be the former. We also know that engagement parties are more non-inevitable than marriage because without marriage, there would not be engagement parties. Again, though this reading cannot perhaps offer an infallible or highly exact manner of assessing grades of social dependence, it goes quite some way in articulating a principled method of settling debates about whether and to what extent X is a social construction.

Closely related to the issue of X's non-inevitability is that of X's alterability - specifically, X's potential for alteration by human action, intentional or otherwise. The Dependence Reading is closely connected to alterability, though logically independent from it. Revealing the dependence of X upon culture and individual or group decisions suggests that it is within our power to change X through future choices. Highlighting X's dependence upon social factors may also stress our responsibility to modify X if X is (thought to be) unjust. Yet given the particularities of socio-political-material circumstances, some social phenomena may be difficult or even impossible to alter at a given point in space and time due to conceptual or physical limitations - consider the likelihood of same-sex marriage being considered a conceptual or substantive legal possibility in Canada in the year 1900. According to the Alterability Reading, then, the claim that "X need not have happened or be at all as it is" refers to the extent to which it *is* within our control to some significant extent to determine whether X continues to exist as it is currently or at all in some space and time.

Again, the Alterability and Dependence Readings are not equivalent. According to the former, X must be alterable substantively and not merely theoretically and X must be, at least in part, socially caused or constituted. Without adding this last caveat, too many obviously non-social phenomena would be included under the banner of "alterable," phenomena we would certainly not want to qualify as social constructions (e.g. the distance between Earth and Mars and the genome of the fruit fly). While the Alterability Reading specifies that X must be alterable *by us*, our alteration of X, whether synchronically or diachronically and whether historically or in the time to come, need not be deliberate. The Alterability Reading offers a strengthened version of the Dependence Reading (or, to put the point differently, a more strict or robust criterion by which X can be said to count as a social construction). On the Alterability Reading, the claim that "X is not determined by the nature of things, it is not inevitable" is roughly equivalent to stating that X (where X meets the conditions specified by the Dependence Reading) *is* within our power to alter in the here and now. The Dependence Reading thus requires less of an X in order that it qualify as a social construction: X can qualify as a social construction without meeting the conditions of the Alterability Reading (e.g., X may be dependent on social factors for its existence at time t^1, but be inalterable, given ideological constraints, at t^1).

Whether X is within our power to alter is both a theoretical and a practical issue. While X may be theoretically alterable (while X may be alterable in the widest sense of counterfactual possibility), it may be practically inalterable in some space and time - in this case, one may want to say that X meets the conditions of the Dependence Reading, but not those of the Alterability Reading. To put the point differently, even if the social constructionist sees the here and now as good and timely for X's alteration, as a matter of course, X may fail to be altered in the way the social constructionist envisions or may fail to be altered at all. In other

words, the ameliorative social constructionist's program may fail to be taken up and substantively enacted by some or all of its audience. This may be because the program fails, in the audience's opinion, to accurately capture what it intends to capture or because the audience, even accepting the program as persuasive, fails to take up, for a variety of reasons, the ameliorative or transformative aspects that the program specifies. Oftentimes, independent of whether there exist good reasons for a community to alter X, whether X really is alterable by human effort in a given space and time is an issue that can only be answered after the fact. As Charles Taylor writes on this theme, "[h]uman science is largely *ex post* understanding. Or often one has the sense of impending change, of some big reorganization, but it is powerless to make clear what it will consist in …" (50). There is, to put it simply, an issue about whether there are good reasons for people to be moved to alter X and an issue about whether they will.

With these difficulties on the table, I nonetheless illustrate how the Alterability Reading might function. I do this through a consideration of alterability as it applies to the following case, namely the baptism of a child as "female-" or "male-" gendered by the child's parents and community in a context where conceptually, only two gender categories exist. Given the social conditions, that is, given that the community recognizes only two mutually exclusive gender categories, the child will be declared either female or male. This situation is counterfactually alterable - it was possible (in some wide sense) that the community did recognize more than two gender categories or that the community even rejected the concept of gender altogether. The degree to which the situation (in this case, gender assignment) is counterfactually alterable is, in turn, dependent on the particularities of the social-historical context. In this sense, gender and sex designation is more likely to be made inclusive of non-binary genders and sexes in the year 2024 in some parts of the world than it was in the year 1900 in Canada. But one does not want to say that in Canada, circa 1900, gender assignment was not a social construction *tout court*: Categories of gender assignment were and are, at least in part, dependent on social factors. Whether anyone knows it, gender met and meets the simple Dependence Reading both in 1900 and today. And by now, at least in some parts of the world, it is commonplace to accept that gender is a social construct and that gender also meets the conditions stipulated by the Alterability Reading. That gender is alterable (contemporarily and in some places) is made plausible by the proliferation of terms/concepts such as "ze," "gender fucking," "pan-genderism," and materially, by the designation of more and more "gender-neutral" bathrooms, for instance.

While gender meets the Dependence Reading's conditions, thus constituting an instance of a social construction, gender assignment in Canada circa 1900 did not meet the criteria stipulated by the Alterability Reading. This is because, in the not so distant past, the actual capacity for gender assignment's being conceived as non-binary (and even more recently and only in select places, the capacity for sex

assignment's being non-binary) was not within our power to amend because it was not within our imaginations. With the Alterability Reading in mind, perhaps it is best to say that gender was *less* socially constructed in Canada in 1900 precisely because it was less alterable. One might not want to commit to this claim and may wish rather to stipulate plainly that gender either was or was not a social construction in 1900. According to the latter reading, given my defense and elucidation of the Dependence Reading, and given that gender met the conditions of the Dependence Reading in 1900, it simply *was* a social construction. Meeting the condition of the Dependence Reading seems, thus, to be the most minimal condition by which some X can count as a social construction.

Socially constituted phenomena alterable at a given time may be inalterable or vary in their degree of alterability at another time or location. As the gender assignment example illustrates, X can count as a social construction according to the Dependence Reading, but nonetheless be inalterable at some point in space and time; thus, I stress once more that the Dependence and Alterability Readings are logically independent. The Dependence Reading seems to capture what descriptive social constructionists want to capture, namely, that X's being a social construction is a matter of degree or the degree to which X's existence is dependent on social factors. The Alterability Reading intends to persuade its audience that if X is a social construction, then X *is* substantively (and not merely in the widest sense of theoretical possibility) alterable by us in the here and now. But X's actual potential for alteration by us is something to be determined after the fact and depends on audience uptake, complicated ideological relations, and so on. The Dependence Reading does not emphasize our current state or make a claim about our actual ability to change X, but merely underscores the degree of dependence of X's existence upon social factors. I suggest that meeting some degree of dependence on social factors is sufficient to qualify X as a social construction. Alterability, as I have defined it above, is a stricter or more robust version of the Dependence Reading. Hence, one might say that if X meets the conditions of the Alterability Reading, it is more robustly a social construction.

The Alterability Reading faces complications. The usual thought, or at least the usual implication on the part of social constructionists, is that phenomena more dependent on social factors are more easily alterable than phenomena that are less dependent for their existence upon social factors. At worst, this thought is simply wrongheaded, and at best, it requires much more careful analysis (certainly more than I can provide here). But let me say at least a few words on the issue. There may exist some natural or empirical (biological, chemical, physical) factors over which we have as much or even *more* control than social factors. Intervention into the physical differs from intervention into the social for a variety of reasons. Insofar as mechanisms of causation are sometimes more easily isolatable in the physical domain, the alterability of natural (non-social) phenomena undertaken by us may be more straightforwardly or effectively carried out than in the case of our

attempts to alter social phenomena. As Taylor writes of the social domain, "we cannot shield a certain domain of human events, the psychological, economic, political, from external interference; it is impossible to delineate a closed system" (49).

A condition of success of social constructionist debunking and the successful alteration of elements of the social world in turn requires an effective analysis and critique of ideology. But ideologies are not typically bounded. Delineating how many ideologies are at work and how to separate and target their force is epistemically and practically challenging. Further, ideology's normalizing and hegemonic effects also challenge the alterability of some social phenomena. Once an ideology is well entrenched, it can be invisible to those who participate in upholding it. Thus, social phenomena may be difficult to alter on account of human beings' tendency towards the status quo. Further, while there exist interactions between social-scientific and lay classifications and practices and broader habits or cultural practices, these interactions are typically between classifications and individuals who *un*reflectively conform or react to them. Since it is unclear to what extent ideologies are volitional, it is also unclear how to go about undermining their force. Another major impediment to amending current concepts or practices relates to the relevance of space and time to the contents of consciousness. As the gender conferral example above serves to illustrate, in the ever-present now, human beings are not capable of conferring any meaning whatsoever upon a situation and nor are they capable of understanding any individual or group as falling under any social category whatsoever. Individuals and groups are constrained in their ability to alter or possess concepts by their situatedness in space and time. The very possibilities for the content of consciousness or directions of concrete action are limited by one's social-historical-political situation.

These complexities do not wholly undermine the Alterability Reading of "non-inevitability," but they do show that if one adopts the Alterability Reading, then some phenomena that are socially constructed or non-inevitable in the here and now were perhaps not in the past and vice versa. Unless this is an intolerable consequence, which I do not think it is, the existence of these complexities does not present a damning case against the Alterability Reading's understanding of "non-inevitability" or of what it means to say that some X is socially constructed. Even in contexts where X is widely agreed to be a social construction, that is, a phenomenon moderately to highly dependent upon social features and which is, at least to some extent, knowingly within our power to alter (given history, present amendments), a social constructionist analysis has purchase. Such an analysis serves to clarify or delimit the nature of X and to *remind* and keep open-minded a particular audience of X's nature.

I have suggested that the claim of non-inevitability on the part of social constructionists can be fruitfully understood as (i) a claim about what kind of features are central to X's existence (i.e., a claim about the degree of dependence

of X on other social features) and (ii) a claim about X's alterability which refers specifically to why, in the here and now, it *is* within our ability to change X. Though the distinction between the inevitable and the non-inevitable is not hard and fast, and although the possibility of successful alteration must be relativized to context (space/time/imaginative possibilities), the social constructionist's assertion of Thesis (1) is not therefore rudderless. The social constructionist offers a productive program just in case she can do as little (or as much) as disrupt an interlocutor's confidence or fideism in the view that some X's existence is independent of social factors or inalterable. Minimally, the social constructionist succeeds in her program if she can move her interlocutors to be skeptical rather than dogmatic about X (even where X refers to the notion of "non-inevitability" itself). Inducing skepticism does not necessarily lead to quietude or to defeatism. If one's commitments can be shaken concerning the inevitability of X or the necessity of X's particular features, one may become more willing to alter their commitments, both theoretically and practically.

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