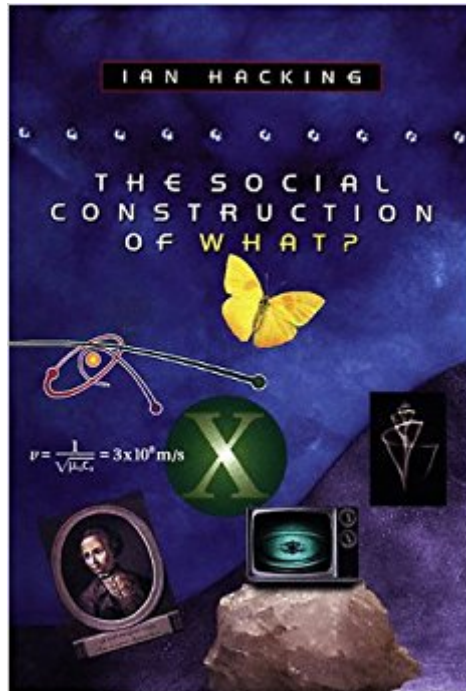


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The Social Construction Of What?



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.

Book Information

Paperback: 272 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press (November 15, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674004124

ISBN-13: 978-0674004122

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.6 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 13 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #61,514 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #13 in [Books > Textbooks >](#)

[Humanities > Philosophy > Epistemology](#) #42 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences >](#)

[Philosophy > Epistemology](#) #152 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > History & Surveys](#)

Customer Reviews

To what extent are our claims to knowledge supported by reality? To what extent are they social constructs? Hacking (philosophy, Univ. of Toronto; *Mad Travelers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illnesses*) is one of the best philosophers of science and society of our time. Here, as usual, he argues from carefully researched examples. Hacking refuses to be bullied into taking

either side of the debate on science vs. objective truth, but he recognizes that a dizzying process started with the attempt (which he finds in Kant) to see morality as a human construct. The idea that all knowledge might be a construct inevitably follows. Unfortunately, Hacking does not explore the part played by the separation of the good from the true in the press-ganging of much science into the service of the military industrial complex; his weak chapter is on weapons research. Despite this glaring deficiency, this is a delightful book—balanced, fun to read, and packed with information on everything from nuclear physics, nanobacteria, and madness to the deification of Captain Cook. For all academic libraries. —Leslie Armour, Univ. of Ottawa Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

[A] spirited and eminently readable book — Hacking's book is an admirable example of both useful debunking and thoughtful and original philosophizing — an unusual combination of good sense and technical sophistication. After he has said his say about the science wars, Hacking concludes with fascinating essays on, among other things, fashions in mental disease, the possible genesis of dolomitic rock from the activity of nanobacteria, government financing of weapons research, and the much-discussed question of whether the Hawaiians thought Captain Cook was a god. In each he makes clear the contingency of the questions scientists find themselves asking, and the endless complexity of the considerations that lead them to ask one question rather than another. The result helps the reader see how little light is shed on actual scientific controversies by either traditionalist triumphalists or postmodern unmaskers. (Richard Rorty *The Atlantic*) Hacking is a Canadian philosopher of science, with important studies of probability and psychology to his name. He is no less at home in Continental philosophy and social theory than in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. His ability to leap with enviable facility from one to the other qualifies him well to bring some order into this intellectual quagmire. (Daniel Johnson *New York Times Book Review*) Ian Hacking is among the best philosophers now writing about science — He discusses psychopathology, weapons research, petrology, and South Pacific ethnography with the same skeptical intelligence he brings to quarks and electron microscopy. It is not his aim to enter a partisan controversy, still less to decide it. Instead, he clearly explains what is at stake — nothing less than the intellectual authority of modern science. (Barry Allen *Science*) *The Social Construction of What?* explores the significance of the idea of social construction, not simply in science but also in other arenas — Hacking's arguments are important. (Kenan Malik *The Independent*) The commonplace idea of science as the construction of models caught fire in the 1970s. It became — as Ian Hacking notes in his intelligent miscellany, *The Social Construction of*

What? – a rallying cry for the radical optimists who relished the thought that social forms are transient and resented any attempt to freeze them for eternity on the authority of something called 'science' – [Hacking] prefers to explore the territory that lies between the banalities. He concentrates on phenomena such as 'child abuse' or 'women refugees', wondering in what sense they existed before they were conceptualised as such and noting the 'looping effects' through which objective realities can be moulded by intellectual artefacts and hence by transient political and conceptual interests or even facts. (Times Higher Education Supplement) Hacking's good humour and easy style make him one of those rare contemporary philosophers I can read with pleasure. (Steven Weinberg Times Literary Supplement) A welcome and timely arrival. Both a philosopher of science and a contributor to constructionism, Hacking speaks across the great divide. As his book title implies, he finds that the terms of this intellectual engagement vary considerably from case to case, and that the terminology of this engagement has all too often been sloppily employed on both sides. Examining an eclectic range of examples, from a nasty ethnographic spat over Captain Cook's murder on a Hawaiian beach to the influence of weapons research on the related hard sciences, he teases out the finer points that constitute the middle ground – By meting out credit while illuminating complexities, nuances, and missteps on both sides, Hacking's work implicitly urges a truce in the science wars. (Kenneth Gergen Civilization) While informed by a sophisticated grasp of the issues, [The Social Construction of What?] is accessible, witty, and good-humored in tone. There are fascinating discussions of social constructionist claims regarding subjects as diverse as gender, Zulu nationalism, quarks, and dolomite. (T. A. Torgerson Choice) Hacking is one of the best philosophers of science and society of our time. Here, as usual, he argues from carefully researched examples – This is a delightful book – evenhanded, fun to read, and packed with information on everything from nuclear physics, nanobacteria, and madness to the deification of Captain Cook. (Leslie Armour Library Journal) [Ian Hacking] dispute[s] the claims of leftist professors, who try to fight oppression by showing that race, gender and sexuality, far from being legitimate bases for discrimination, are hardly real at all and merely the results of 'social construction.' In The Social Construction of What? the distinguished philosopher looks at how this kind of argument works, and particularly at cases – in the natural sciences, and with social phenomena like child abuse in which it can endanger a clear sense of what 'reality' is. (Publishers Weekly) In his Preface, Hacking describes this book as a kind of primer for noncombatants in the culture wars, understood as being fought between the 'social constructionists' who hold that knowledge is constitutively and importantly a social product, and those who see knowledge as being importantly distinct from the social realm

(scientists being the exemplary instances of the latter). I especially like his discussion of the social sciences and their peculiar relation to their objects – the discussion of 'interactive kinds' and the 'looping effect' through which people can reflexively react to social science descriptions by, for example, acting out and upon such descriptions. There is an interesting line of development here concerning the difference between the social and the natural sciences, and the different senses of 'construction' that might be appropriate to each. The book accomplishes its chosen task in clarifying what constructionism is about and why people get excited about it. I might add that besides noncombatants in the culture wars, the book should interest and inform some of the combatants, too – it should help the anticonstructionists get clearer on the actual contours of their enemy's position. Hacking is one of the most important philosophers working today. (Andrew Pickering, author of *Constructing Quarks* and *The Mangle of Practice*) This book offers a helpful contribution to the discussion of social constructionism and its limits, both for hard scientists who feel threatened by it and for those who practice it. This is a fun book, as Hacking takes pokes at social constructionists and clarifies what they are about. (Matthew P. Lawson *Health, Illness, and Medicine*) An interesting and invaluable frontline perspective on the causes and results of the revolution from someone close enough to it to understand it and explain it to the rest of us. Its chief merits are its linguistic clarity, intellectual scope, and self-referentiality. Communication scholars who know little about social construction will find this a very readable introduction to the major ideas being debated. (Scott R. Olson *Journal of Communication*)

Ian Hacking's "The Social Construction of What?" is aptly titled, as it deals with the question what the ever so popular phrase 'socially constructed' actually means, if it means anything. In his typical upbeat tone, making use of short, almost staccato sentences, Hacking reviews several possible meanings of the phrase 'social construction', notes the "sticking points" that are the core of the disagreement, and takes some cases from sociology, geology, anthropology and physics to illustrate the problematic. Although Hacking is a fine and accessible writer, and anyone at all can read this book with pleasure, he does tend to be meandering; there is little overall structure to the book, which reads more as a series of musings by an intelligent observer on a difficult question than as a definitive stance on the issue, which Hacking doesn't really have. It's also not always clear what the relation is between the examples of scientific research and debate he cites and the philosophy of science question of social construction. Nonetheless, his philosophical talk is always entertaining and interesting to read, and some people will definitely find a virtue in the fact Hacking never pushes an opinion on the reader, preferring to 'teach the controversy' instead. If there's a sort

of philosophical popular science, this would be it.

Hacking is probably a great instructor to have a class with, but his books all tend to be opaque for beginning students because he actually uses a sense of humor and irony in his writing.... not that this is a bad thing, but it seems to either turn off students or confuse them. More of a good inspirational read for instructors.

What is objectively real and what is a construct? It may seem like a simple question, but as with all things, the closer you look, the more complex things become. Hacking's 'Social Construction of What' highlights this complexity and helped me to realize how much of reality is constructed in different ways. Hacking points out that seeing constructs can help to shake up a subject and unsettle surface assumptions. He reminds us that they are a tool for critical theory to help unmask structures of ideology, power, and control. And, to me, exploring the social construction of science doesn't threaten science at all--it only makes us aware of science's limits and suggests reality might be larger and more nuanced than we ordinarily assume. The book isn't an ideal introduction to construction theories. I was disappointed by the coverage of some of the issues and, at times, I felt Hacking's discussion got way off track, particularly with some of the re-purposed studies toward the end. But overall the book is a provocative epistemological study that heightens awareness of the loose and malleable boundaries of what we commonly accept as real.

The tussle between hard science and cultural theorizing as plagued the social sciences for the past 30 years if not longer. For too long have we been subjected to rounds of pointless debates about whether a phenomenon is natural or an idea developed and nurtured by our culture. In other words, a "social construct." Few things vex hard scientists and common-sense types more than the implication that certain real world "truths" are just figments of our cultural imagination reified and relived over and over again by virtue of our social practices. Perhaps an extreme example of this debate is the nature-nurture debate common in biology and exacerbated by debates in evolutionary psychology about whether practices are part of an innate ahistorical human nature or byproducts of human culture nurtured in children. Is this label "social construct" a product of legitimate critique or is it a manifestation of the shallow "postmodernization" of the academy and human knowledge by theory-immersed tenured radicals? Canadian philosopher of science Ian Hacking finally clears away all the bushes and fog around this concept to make a sound and calm intervention into the science/culture wars. Rather than choose one side or another, Hacking shows forms of "social

constructivist" thinking can be found in the claims and observations of many different thinkers and scientists in the field, as well as how both "social constructionism" and hard science may re-enforce each other in many different fields. In doing so, he proves wrong those who view anything remotely "social constructionist" as irrational and fantastic. He demonstrates how such claims are part and parcel of everyday production of knowledge and how rather than debate over a dichotomy, it would be better to approach the sciences as they are and see how both may reinforce each other to make claims whose correspondence with verifiable objective reality may vary depending on the type of claim being made. On this criteria, Hacking's adherence to either SC or HS (Hard science) fluctuates. This is an important intervention into the science/culture debates, seeking to transcend such petty dichotomies, and can also be read as a corrective to books like Pinker's The Blank Slate which seek to argue for a biologically determined nature. It can also be read as a reply to Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's Fashionable Nonsense, which ridiculed swathes of cultural theory for seemingly "relativizing hard scientific facts." Hacking dismisses such puerile debates, firmly placing scientific knowledge within its cultural-social context while exhibiting respect for the observations and discoveries scientific knowledge has made regarding our world, the human body and beyond. If there is any book to read on topics such as this, this book would be it.

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