

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, POWER AND BEHAVIOUR: A POST-STRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Human nature has always been a hot topic of discussion in the literature of Political Philosophy, with the dialectical relation between agent and structure occupying an important part of the debate since the dawn of structuralism in the 1960's. This essay argues that a normative type of behaviour is mainly socially constructed and that the features inherent to human nature, according to the essentialist tradition, have little to no impact on how behaviour and decision-making occurs. The methodology applied will be based on the theory that reality is a direct product of social construction, followed by a deconstruction, using a post-structuralist lens, of the structures which restrict, constrain and distort human behaviour, as well as a discussion on how the existence and impacts of those structures became unquestioned and tacitly accepted as an integral part of human nature. On the last part of the essay, I will discuss the important role of social constructionism and post-structuralism on the ongoing debate in the literature.

Keywords

Human nature, nature vs. nurture, behaviourism, social constructionism, post-structuralism

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Introduction

What is human nature? Is the individual fully independent of social, cultural and economic factors? If the answer is “No”, how is the individual influenced by them? How are these structures constructed and maintained? Can we go beyond these structures in order to truthfully identify what is, in fact, human nature? These are the set of questions this essay proposes to address, in order to study the influence of socio-cultural structures in individuals and, in turn, how individuals contribute to maintain them. I will apply a multi-disciplinary approach, analysing the concept of human nature, the consequent manifestations of behaviour and, more importantly, the relations between agent and structure, as a way to support the claims presented in this essay.

Firstly, I will define human nature, contrasting opposite views, as it will be the basis for the core arguments. The human nature debate, usually called the “nature versus nurture” debate (a term coined by the English anthropologist Francis Galton) is a traditional approach to this topic, which will be followed throughout the essay. On the “nature” side, academics believe in a strictly coded human behaviour based on human genes and evolution, which directly shaped our behaviour and understanding of the world. On the “nurture” side, behaviour is carved out of the environment the agent is a part of, thus rejecting the existence of an “essence” – in Aristotelian terms, “the what it was to be” (Cohen, 2016) -, emphasizing the importance of the conjectural factors in the way we feel, think, react and make decisions.

Secondly, after discussing and defining human nature, I will focus on the social constructionism theory, as developed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. According to this theory, “as man externalizes himself, he constructs the world into which he externalizes himself. In the process of externalization, he projects his own meanings into reality.” (Berger & Luckmann, p.122). This way, a collective understanding of the world is concomitantly produced by the agents of a given society, in an ongoing process of mutual confirmation, perpetuated *ad aeternum*, as long as they are part of that society.

Social constructionism is a theory that can be defined as a view that believes most aspects of human life function in a certain way due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen, 1985). The influence of genetically inherited factors and the impact of socio-cultural factors are not necessarily mutually exclusive; what is argued here is that environmental influences, either on an individual or on a communal level, have primacy over genetical ones (Galbin, 2014). Berger’s theory provides a mechanism which explains

how these socio-cultural influences work on subverting an agent's way of behaving by developing the idea that when individuals and groups are in permanent reciprocal contact with each other, a social system is inevitably created. Concepts, ideas and mental representations of individuals' roles and institutions are gained through mutual observation and subsequent mutual agreement on the way the world functions. A dialectical dilemma appears as a direct consequence of Berger and Luckmann's analysis, particularly in their distinction between agent and structure: does the agent "create" the structure or does the structure "create" the agent? This essay argues under the latter proposition, although it does not flatly deny some considerable influence of genes and evolution on human behaviour, especially regarding the initial construction of social, cultural and economic structures. However, the extent of the impact that genetic factors had (or still have) on human behaviour is somewhat questionable, taken into consideration the way structures seemed to remain largely unaltered throughout modern human history.

Lastly, it is important to notice how a critical view of the "nature vs. nurture" debate still has deep impacts in modern discussions. Social constructionism brings an alternative philosophical assumption regarding the construction on how knowledge is produced and how reality is built in relation with that knowledge (Galbin, 2014). If we take into consideration that the aspects of our understanding of the world that are taken-for-granted are not so absolute after all, alternative approaches to our knowledge about reality and about ourselves are possible, widening the scope for the possibilities of understanding reality from different perspectives and approaches.

1. Nature vs. Nurture

Since the 19th century, the dialectical debate in Anthropology between the impact of both genetic and heritable traits (nature) and the denial of that influence (nurture) on human behaviour has been commonplace. Galton (1874, p.12) conceptualized that "nature is all that a man brings with himself into the world; nurture is every influence without that affects him after his birth". However, recent literature has been keener on finding a synthesis between the two views, arguing that both nature and nurture have significant impacts on human behaviour. In light of that synthesis, we must ask ourselves: where we should draw the line? How impactful are environmental factors in the way someone behaves? This question starts being posed by John Locke, a proponent of the *tabula rasa* (blank slate), who first mentioned the term in his *magnum opus An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689):

Let us then suppose the mind to have no ideas in it, to be like white paper with nothing written on it. (...) Our understandings derive all the materials of thinking from observations that we make of external objects that can be perceived through the senses, and of the internal operations of our minds, which we perceive by looking in at ourselves. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from which arise all the ideas we have or can naturally have. (Locke, 2014, p.95)

Locke's main argument consists on the assumption that, at birth, the human mind is essentially a "white paper". This means that humans don't have any inherent rule for processing data, nor in-built data. Agents are highly dependent on the inputs they receive *a posteriori* of birth. These inputs derive from sensory experience and, as such, "no man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience." (Locke, 2014, p.105). If the human mind is, indeed, a "white paper", then anything can be written on it. On the "nurture" side of the debate, environment (and the normative structures that constitute the environment) fully "create" the human mind, shaping the way we act, feel and make decisions, outright rejecting any significant influence of genetic inheritance and biological traits. "Blank-slatism", as it is commonly called, remained a very popular trend up until the 21st century, where it fell in disuse.

On the "nature" side of the debate, criticism started developing mainly on the 19th century, especially with authors such as Francis Galton, who was influenced by Charles Darwin's works. Evolutionary theory was quite present in Galton's studies, portraying a clear contrast to blank-slatism. He famously declared that "a man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world" (Galton, 1869, p.1). Galton further develops this notion of an inter-connection between human behaviour and natural characteristics, stating in *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* (1869):

I have no patience with the hypothesis (...) that babies are born pretty much alike, and that the sole agencies in creating differences between boy and boy, and man and man, are steady application and moral effort. It is in the most unqualified manner that I object to pretensions of natural equality. The experiences of the nursery, the school, the University, and of professional careers, are a chain of proofs to the contrary. I acknowledge freely the great power of education and social influences in developing the active powers of the mind, just as I acknowledge the effect of use in developing the muscles of a blacksmith's arm, and no further. Let the blacksmith labour as he will, he will find there are certain feats beyond his power that are well within the strength of a man of herculean make, even although the latter may have led a sedentary life. (Galton, 1869, p.14)

On evolutionary terms, human beings are inherently limited by their natural capacities, and no amount of effort or learning allows them to overcome those limitations. Notwithstanding, natural factors are grossly imputed to

most aspects of human behaviour and are given more credit than they're worth. Someone not having a "herculean make" is redundant on a societal level. More than trying to pin-point what given inherited feature should translate to, in terms of social roles, what is important is to analyse how individuals can be expected to perform different reasonable roles within society, granting they have the capacity to adapt and learn to perform in a multitude of ways, even though they are not the most "genetically apt" to perform those roles.

1.1 The Almost Blank Slate: An analytical behaviourist account

Since I will not have enough space to argue under each of these premises, I will adopt three main assertions: 1 – Humans are born closer to the "blank slate" state than any other species; 2 – There is a large part of knowledge that is unknown to humans at birth; 3 – Most of similarities and differences in behaviour between individuals can be attributed to learning and the influence of social structures (Schlinger, 2004). Even among evolutionary biologists, such as Douglas Futuyma (1979, p.491), there is an acknowledgment that genetic features have a fairly limited role in shaping human behaviour:

On balance, the evidence for the modifiability of human behaviour is so great that genetic constraints on our behaviour hardly seem to exist. The dominant factor in recent human evolution has been the evolution of behavioural flexibility, the ability to learn and transmit culture.

To put it simply, even if we acknowledge that the ability to learn and adapt is made possible by a nervous system that was built specifically for that task, similarities and differences between individuals (and groups of individuals) are still mainly explained by learning patterns that are apprehended from their surroundings, cultural context and social interactions. The learning history of the individual is bound to supersede the evolutionary history of the species. This approach to human nature is an analytical behaviourist one, following an anti-nativist position in which it is assumed that human beings do not have any innate rules for learning and attributing meaning. What is being analysed here is how a person behaves under specific conditions and how individuals can be characterized in terms of what he or she will do (or has a tendency to do), given particular situations and environmental interactions (Graham, 2019). Accordingly, "rules are derived from contingencies, which specify discriminative *stimuli*, responses and consequences" (Skinner, 1984, p.1). But how does this relate to social constructionism?

2. Social Constructionism

One of the theories most widely used to explain the appearance of certain socio-cultural structures is social constructionism. This theory regards individuals “as integral with cultural, political and historical evolution, in specific times and places, and so resituates psychological processes cross-culturally, in social and temporal contexts.” (Galbin, 2014, p.85). The core idea of social constructionism is that most aspects of humanity are created, shaped, maintained and destroyed by interactions between individuals and/or social groups throughout time. Individuals construct their understanding of the world and elaborate meanings over different phenomena. Reality is not an objective truth, but simply an apprehended one. It is also assumed that individuals do this cooperatively with others, rather than strictly relying on individual rationality. As Boghossian (2001, p.1) so aptly explains:

The core idea (of social constructionism) seems clear enough. To say of something that it is socially constructed is to emphasize its dependence on contingent aspects of our social selves. It is to say: This thing could not have existed had we not built it; and we need not have built it at all, at least not in its present form. Had we been a different kind of society, had we had different needs, values, or interests, we might well have built a different kind of thing, or built this one differently.

Social constructs start being accepted as “natural” by society and form the basis of our knowledge and daily lives. A clear example of such a construct is money. Money, regardless of its form (gold, paper money, digital currencies, etc.) is, in itself, worthless. How come an apparently random piece of paper or some digits in a bank account allow you to exchange products, engage in trade and attribute “worth” to objects or labour? Money can be used as a reliable instrument for trade since everybody accepts its worth. The fact that there is an “agreement”, which establishes that “ten euros” are worth “ten euros” (and that this gives you the ability to purchase X for a seemingly arbitrary price), is a taken-for-granted reality of our everyday lives, even though there is no empirical reason to affirm that there is actual worth in money.

2.1 *The creation of concepts*

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant introduces the notion of “transcendental idealism”. Kant, according to Boghossian’s (2001, p.4) view, argues that “there is a world that exists independently of human minds”. The individual consciously cognizes objects not as they materially are, but as the way they appear to him, under the limits of his sensibility. The notion that we can apprehend objects as they are in themselves is thoroughly rejected by

Kant, meaning that we can only understand the world through cognition. Boghossian's neo-Kantian argument for the construction of concepts is a powerful one: if the world is inherently structureless, this means that we, as agents of rationality, impose structure upon it by understanding the world in a certain way, by attributing meanings to inherently meaningless things and by having certain beliefs about the world rather than others.

Let's return to our previous example about the "agreed" worth of money. The creation of the "concept" of money is an entirely human invention; although money can, most of the times, physically exist (as in the case of gold coins), the creation of the structure where money is used as a transaction method is still created by social convention. The conceptualization of "money" is, in Boghossian terms, a way of communicating and socializing based on a mutual conceptual scheme or language game. The organization and structuring of the world has the consequence of providing easier and more intuitive explanations for the individual, who leans on these "cognitive shortcuts" in order to live his daily life as a member of society.

2.2 The Social Construction of Reality

The building process of a social construct like "money" is a very complex, albeit intuitive, process of mutually agreed understanding. Berger & Luckmann's account (1976), in the field of the sociology of knowledge, proposes a plausible explanation for this phenomenon. When a given concept or social norm is inserted in society and starts being widely used, habituation mechanisms (i.e. the creation of habits based on *stimuli* provided by your environment) become commonplace. As time passes, behaviours are repeated without anyone questioning why are they acting in a certain way, meaning that "habituation carries with it the important psychological gain that choices are narrowed" because "many actions are possible on a low level of attention." (Berger & Luckmann, 1976, pp.71-75). These institutionalizations of social practices, created by habituation mechanisms, constitute institutional objective worlds from the point institutions are passed on to a new generation. The generations that inherit these institutional worlds perceive it as something given, unalterable and natural. There is a replication of this process throughout the years, originating dogmas, narratives and discourses that perpetuate the newly-generated institutions, especially if taken into consideration the unquestionable underlying logic that support them. This way, "the objective reality of institutions is not diminished if the individual does not understand their purpose or their mode of operation" (Berger & Luckmann, 1976, p.78).

Alexandra Galbin (2014, p.88) sums up Berger & Luckmann's theory in three simple steps: externalization, objectification and internalization:

People externalise when they act on their world, creating some artifact or practice. For example, they may have an idea (such as the idea that the sun revolves around the earth) and externalise it by telling a story or writing a book. But this then enters into the social realm; other people re-tell the story or read the book, and once in this social realm the story or books begin to take on a life of its own. The idea it expresses has become an object of consciousness for people in that society (objectivation) and has developed a kind of factual existence of truth; it seems to be out there, an objective feature of the world which appears as natural, issuing from the nature of the world itself rather than dependent upon the constructive work and interactions of human beings. Finally, because future generations are born into a world where this idea already exists, they internalize it as part of their consciousness, as part of their understanding of the nature of the world.

The notion that the world is socially constructed and understood by the social practices of individuals inside a society is not mutually exclusive with the fact that social constructs appear as a consequence of an interpretation of a natural world that is already there in the first place. As a matter of fact, this actually gives strength and credibility to the argument, since it can be established that agents create concepts and justify them to other agents based on the material properties of the object they are conceptualizing. In other words, individuals impute immaterial properties *a posteriori* of asserting (when possible) the material properties of the object.

2.3 Structures of Power

Having explained how institutions and concepts appear, which help explain how the social, political and cultural structures we live in are created, a question arises on how they are perpetuated and self-maintained. To answer this question, I will adopt a post-structuralist lens, with particular emphasis on Michel Foucault's main work *Discipline and Punish* (1977), which provides an in-depth analysis on how, even though the agents are the ones that apprehend and originally create the various structures they live in, the process of conceptualization itself is extremely limited given the castrating nature of the influence of the environment over the agent. In his book, Foucault's explores four main ideas: Torture, Punishment, Discipline and Prison. The latter two are of particular interest for this essay.

For Foucault, the necessity of disciplinary institutions is fundamental for the maintenance of coercive structures. As he explains, "discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (Foucault, 1977,

p.170). Discipline aggregates a series of techniques by which the body and the mind can be controlled. It works by rearranging the individual's actions, beliefs and place in society, using subliminal coercion. This is achieved by devices such as timetables, confinement to specific places and adherence to certain rules, establishing an authoritative and disciplinary power, which "is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility" (Foucault, 1977, p.187). Through discipline, individuals are shaped out of a mass. This disciplinary power usually operates under three main elements: hierarchical observation, examination and normalization of judgment. Through hierarchical observation and repeated examination, instruments are created for the application of power. Using these processes and instruments, followed by their methodological application to human sciences, institutions and discourse, the notion of "norm" is constructed and inserted into society, remaining largely unquestioned by the agent. Power is a necessary "commodity" for stability. According to Foucault, power exists everywhere and comes from everywhere; it is a key concept because it acts as a type of relation between individuals, as well as formulating a complex form of strategy, with the ability to secretly shape another's behaviour. Structures are properly maintained if there is an effective and knowledgeable use of power.

The notion of "panoptical power" has its origins with Foucault's appropriation of Jeremy Bentham's famous prison project. Bentham's "Panopticon" consists in a prison with a watch tower at its centre, combined with a round system of separated cells circling the tower. The cells are built so that prisoners cannot communicate with one another and they never know when they are being watched. This system, for Bentham, allowed the functioning of a highly efficient prison, in which only one guard could supervise many prisoners. In fact, the same effect is possible even without guards, since the prisoners act on their own as if they are being constantly watched. Constant observation acts as a control mechanism; a consciousness of constant surveillance is then internalized by the prisoners.

Our modern society still works on a similar model. For example, when someone parks his or her car in a zone where payment is mandatory, he or she usually goes to the parking meter and pay for the parking. This is done almost naturally and intuitively, even though nobody is forcing him or her to do so, and the chances of getting fined are pretty slim. This action is still done anyway, out of an internalized fear of being punished. A normalization of sorts, stemming from the threat of discipline, is bound to happen under a society based on these principles. As Foucault (1977, p.187) explains "in this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially by arranging objects". Suitable behaviour is achieved not through

total surveillance, but by panoptic discipline and by inducing the population to conform to norms by the internalization of this “artificially-created” reality. Structures, maintained through disciplinary power, become an unconscious prison for the mind.

Other idea introduced by Foucault, “Prison”, can roughly translate to “punishment”. The aim of prison, and of the carceral system as a whole, is to produce delinquency (i.e. minor crimes/deviation from the norm), as a means of structuring and controlling crime. From this perspective, this system succeeds. The prison is part of a network of power that spreads throughout society. This obviously does not apply only to prisons: delinquency and, generically, not behaving according to norms is always punishable. This creates a very strong incentive for conformation, thus maintaining and legitimating the structures that create the norms to follow in the first place, out of an internalized fear of negative reprisals. Most modern institutions behave this way. When a child first enters primary school, a strict code of conduct is established: there are schedules to follow, mandatory attendance and normative types of behaviour to replicate. All of these aspects are carefully supervised and examined by the “local authority” – that is, the teacher - who qualifies students on how well they adhere to established norms, as well as having the capacity to punish deviants. This type of power relation carries on during the education of the child and goes on into adulthood. In any type of job, there are sets of procedures, norms and deontological codes that must be followed. Compliers are rewarded and promoted; deviants are warned, shunned upon and even fired. Facing this coercive and disciplinary power relation, Foucault (1977, p.304) concludes:

The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I’ve explored the concept of human nature and the timeless dialectical debate of nature vs. nurture. A synthetic position was adopted, although leaning to the “nurture” side. Human beings are limited by their natural features and may be inclined to adopt certain behaviours due to evolutionary constraints. However, there is strong evidence to assert the possibility of a negation of these instinctive behaviours, if not an outright capacity to override them. Adopting an “almost blank-slate” approach on human nature, the hypothesis that agents give meaning to their

surroundings based on social practices that are covertly imposed upon them was placed. Social constructionism theory, particularly Berger & Luckmann's work, explains how agents, having born without any particular way to analyze the world, create meaning through the inputs they receive from their socio-cultural environment, engaging in reciprocal understandings of reality and providing legitimacy to the institutions, as a direct "product of a historical process of interaction and negotiation between groups of people" (Galbin, 2014, p.83). Social constructionism mainly addresses the variety of ways in which knowledge is historically situated and closely related with socio-cultural practices. As Haucourt (2007, p.14) conclusively argues:

The larger structure of institutions and discourses form the functional equivalent of a language that sustains certain practices within a political community, that acts as a mythical narrative, and that has symbolic efficacy. This provided a way of understanding how institutions that seemed appalling could nevertheless gain legitimacy.

The structure created out of the social "agreements" of understanding is maintained by a well-oiled machine of invisible and omnipresent coercion, based on disciplinary power and punitive mechanisms used to discourage potential deviants. If most aspects of the world that are taken-for-granted are actually socially constructed, this suggests that they are dynamic, fluid and susceptible to drastic changes. As such, this essay tried to open up the field to new possibilities of understanding, especially taken into consideration that rationality is not an attribute of individual thinking but mainly a consequence of social and cultural convention. The fact that agents apprehend meaning according to the structure they live in leads to the suggestion that it is the structure who guides the agent's actions and behaviour.

If agents are mainly dependent of the social, cultural and economic structure they live in, then radically different forms of social and political organization are possible, should the "agreement" on conceptual meanings and the perception of reality change. This process is surely difficult; structures are maintained by tacit acceptance on the part of the ones living under them. However, situations do not necessarily give meaning to agents; agents usually have the power to attribute meaning to situations (Haucourt, 2007). Even if there are structures that are considered legitimate by society, social constructionism provides an opportunity for deep modifications on the institutions that create and support the current structures. The possibility for a significant redesign of the agents' behaviours are close to limitless, as new covenants of understanding start replacing earlier ones, creating new concepts, meanings and normative behaviours.

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