

Does Marilyn Strathern Argue that the Concept of Nature Is a Social Construction?

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Abstract: It is tempting to interpret Marilyn Strathern as saying that the concept of nature is a social construction, because in her essay “No Nature, No Culture: the Hagen Case” she tells us that the Hagen people do not describe the world using this concept. However, I point out an obstacle to interpreting her in this way, an obstacle which leads me to reject this interpretation. Interpreting her in this way makes her inconsistent. The inconsistency is owing to a commitment that she shares with previous British anthropologists, a commitment which points to an incompatibility between two intellectual traditions.

Keywords: British social anthropology, concept of nature, innate, Marilyn Strathern, social construction.

In her essay “No Nature, No Culture: the Hagen Case,” the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern tells us that the Hagen people do not rely on the concept of nature when describing the world. More precisely, she denies that they describe the world using the concept of nature which is employed by certain previous anthropologists¹ or any rough equivalent (Strathern 1980, 176). They do use two terms which can roughly be translated as “wild” and “domestic” (Strathern 1980, 191-192), but she thinks that there are good reasons not to regard their contrasts between these two as contrasts between what is natural and what is cultural (Strathern 1980, 195-203).

It is tempting to interpret Strathern as therefore saying or implying that the concept of nature is a social construction. But there is an obstacle to this interpretation.² In the next section of this paper, I consider what it means to say that the concept of nature is a social construction. In the final section, I point out an obstacle to interpreting her as saying this. To state the obstacle briefly: there is a kind of argument which is usually involved when trying to establish that a concept is a social construction, on the basis of anthropological fieldwork, but attributing this argument to Strathern makes her inconsistent.

¹ Strathern believes that there are different concepts of nature (Strathern 1980, 187), but for convenience of expression I shall write simply of ‘the’ concept of nature.

² The obstacle I point out is also an obstacle to interpreting Strathern as asserting that not everyone has the concept of nature. This may well be what summarizers of Strathern mean by non-universality (see Tiffany 1982, 209; Gingrich 2013, 118).

What Does It Mean to Say that the Concept of Nature Is a Social Construction?

There are different ways of understanding the claim that the concept of nature is a social construction. In this section of my paper, I will present two such ways, which are the relevant ways here.³ The first way is as follows:

(Definition 1) To claim that the concept of nature is a social construction is to claim that: (i) the concept of nature is not innate to any human being; and (ii) the concept of nature was brought into existence by one human being or more.

This way of understanding the claim seems attractive at first sight. But someone could make the claim, on this understanding, and then add that the concept of nature was brought into existence by an individual human being, in a creative act which does not involve any concept from others. For someone who thinks in this way, the concept of nature can still be called a construction – something that has been brought into existence – yet why call it a social construction? Even if their additional remark could never be true, one might want the social aspect to be captured within the definition itself.

In order to capture the social aspect, it makes sense to propose another definition:

(Definition 2) To claim that the concept of nature is a social construction is to claim that: (i) the concept of nature is not innate to any human being; (ii) the concept of nature was brought into existence by one human being or more; (iii) the concept of nature was brought into existence in a social way.

This other way of understanding the constructivist claim is different because of component (iii), but unfortunately component (iii) is vague. Presumably, it is meant to exclude that the concept of nature was brought into existence by an individual human being through a creative act which does not involve any concept from others. But we need to further clarify what it is to bring this concept into existence in a social way, in order to have more confidence in what this includes and what it excludes.

I am going to pass over this clarificatory task here. The reason why it is excusable to pass over the task is because the problem I present is a problem whichever definition one works with. It concerns a component which is common to both definitions, namely that the concept of nature is not innate to any human being. Whichever definition one works with, I do not think Strathern should be interpreted as saying that the concept of nature is a social construction, because she does not deny its innateness.

³ There is a possible case which is awkward for both definitions, namely if the concept was brought into existence by non-human creatures and acquired by humans from them.

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Strathern's Commitment to Avoiding Psychology

In the preface to her book *After Nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century*, Strathern instructs readers not to think of her as making psychological claims:

...the apparent ascription of attitudes and beliefs to this or that set of persons should not be mistaken for a study of what people think or feel. (Strathern 1992, xvii)

Strathern implies the same instruction in the preface to another book:

As on other occasions, the present work remains agnostic as to the state of mind or mental processes of the people mentioned. (Strathern 1999, xii)

When Strathern tells us that a particular person believes something, or a particular group believes something, she is not to be understood as telling us about what they believe within their minds. And likewise for other claims that, on the surface, appear to be psychological attributions.

At first sight, Strathern's guidance to her readers is puzzling. How else are we to understand statements which attribute beliefs to a person or a group if not as statements about psychology? I think the answer to this question is that when Strathern tells us that a person believes something, she is saying that the person has spoken or written as if they believe this thing, whatever their private psychological attitudes are. What about if she tells us that a group believes something? If she says that the people of England believe that England has a Queen, she would want to be understood as saying that, in speech or writing, this group represent England as having a Queen, while remaining neutral on what their psychological attitudes are.

Strathern is not the first anthropologist to instruct that she not be read as attributing psychological states. Another such anthropologist, one who may well have influenced her approach, is Edmund Leach. Leach says that his group belief attributions are to be understood in precisely the way presented above. Furthermore, he thinks that this is the way to read any ethnographer's attribution of a group belief. He writes:

When an ethnographer reports that "members of the X tribe believe that..." he is giving a description of an orthodoxy, a dogma, something which is true of the culture as a whole. But Professor Spiro (and all the neo-Tylorians who think like him) desperately believe that the evidence can tell us much more than that - that dogma and ritual must somehow correspond to the inner psychological attitudes of the actors concerned. (Leach 1966, 40)

Note that in this quotation, Leach goes beyond explaining how to understand any ethnographer's attribution of a group belief. He also denies that anthropologists can infer from knowledge of public representations⁴, such as

⁴ I am using 'public representations' here not to mean representations made outside the privacy of the home as opposed to those made within it. Public representations include all spoken and written assertions.

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spoken or written assertions, that there are corresponding psychological attitudes. He has the familiar worry about doing so, that others may be merely acting as if they believe. Immediately after the quotation, he gives an example to illustrate it (Leach 1966, 40). Consider an English girl getting married and participating in a Church of England marriage ritual. She may say words as if she believes in God, as part of the ritual performance, but she could be an atheist.

The article from which the Leach quotation above comes is entitled "Virgin Birth." It responds to the question of whether some groups are ignorant of the causal role of sexual intercourse in childbirth, since members of these groups publicly endorse theories of childbirth which do not acknowledge its causal role. For various reasons, Leach is sceptical that they are ignorant, reasons that we need not go into here (Leach 1966, 41).

Leach and Strathern are part of a British tradition of aiming to do anthropology without psychology (Kuper 1999, 79). From this point until the final paragraph of my paper, I set aside other members of this tradition and focus only on Strathern.

Consider the following argument:

1. The Hagen people do not use the concept of nature in their public representations. (Anthropological evidence establishes this as a fact.)
2. If the Hagen people do not use the concept of nature in their public representations, then members of this group of human beings do not have the concept of nature.
3. If members of a certain group of human beings do not have the concept of nature, then the concept of nature is not innate to any human being.

Therefore:

4. The Hagen people do not have the concept of nature and this concept is not innate to any human being.

To be consistent, Strathern cannot make this argument, because premise (2) carries an implication about psychological states and she is committed to not taking a stand on psychological states. Premise (2) implies that members of the Hagen people never have thoughts which rely on the concept of nature. Strathern is prepared to say that the Hagen people do not use the concept of nature in their public representations, or at least did not use this concept when she studied them, but she is not prepared to make or imply any such claim about their thoughts. Her work is meant to be neutral on the speculation that Hageners have the concept of nature but they just do not display it in speech and writing, however improbable this speculation may seem to readers.

I think the argument above is an instance of the normal way of moving from anthropological fieldwork to the conclusion that some concept is not innate. This kind of argument says that we have evidence that a group do not use a certain concept in their public representations, then infers that group members do not have this concept, and then infers that the concept is not innate to any human

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being.⁵ The inconsistency that results from attributing this kind of argument to Strathern gives rise to the question, “In her essay on the Hagen case, is she best interpreted as saying or implying that the concept of nature is a social construction?” To avoid making her inconsistent for no reason, our default interpretation should be “No, she only says that Hageners did not use the concept of nature in their public representations when her fieldwork was carried out.” Of course, we may abandon this interpretation if there is sufficient evidence, but I cannot see that there is.

Although I have focused on Strathern’s research regarding the concept of nature, it seems to me that beyond her work, there is an incompatibility between much traditional British social anthropology⁶ and the normal way of arguing that some concept is not innate to human beings, on the basis of anthropological fieldwork. Traditional British social anthropologists cannot make these arguments without abandoning a commitment of theirs: to remain neutral on what is thought and felt.

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⁵ The inference that if some group of human beings does not have a certain concept, then it is not innate, seems to be based on the genetic commonality of human beings. Such commonality makes it unlikely that a concept is innate to one group but not to another.

⁶ I would not describe Strathern herself as a traditional British social anthropologist. Her best-known anthropological work seems to be a kind of worldview description, saying that Melanesians represent themselves as ‘dividuals,’ composed of obligation-generating gifts from others, rather than individual self-owners (Strathern 1988, 34; Mosko 2010, 218). But she does accept some commitments of the British tradition.

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