rized as kinds of slave (or "herd") morality in Nietzsche's assessment.

Assessments of Nietzsche's Analysis. In the past century, many attempts have been made to engage Nietzsche's analysis of morality from both philosophical and theological standpoints. One of the most prolonged and well-known engagements with Nietzsche's theory has been that of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1929–). In many of his publications, MacIntyre often has provided serious reflections on the merit of Nietzsche's analysis of morality, using the genealogical method that Nietzsche developed throughout his career.

SEE ALSO RESENTMENT; WILL TO POWER.

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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism claims that a given OBJECT is merely conventional or the product of a SOCIETY's beliefs. Whether a particular case merits this classification can be controversial, but typical examples include artifacts such as money and corporations, as well as such social roles and practices as policemen and baseball; other examples might include various classifications of persons that are commonly recognized in a given society, such as being black or white in America or being a Brahmin or an Untouchable in India. In contrast to constructionism, which asserts that a thing or type exists only in that people believe it to exist, REALISM about an object claims that the object is what it is regardless of what people may think or feel about it. Both constructionism and realism are ontological theories; that is, they make claims about the mode of BEING that various objects enjoy, about what constitutes EXISTENCE for certain things.

Realism versus Constructionism. A radical anticonstructionist theory might hold that nothing is a social construct. A plausible argument for this view might be that mere human beliefs cannot create anything (cannot give existence to an entity) or change what a thing is (cannot give to an entity its ESSENCE or substantial form). On the contrary, some things are clearly social constructs, for there is good reason to say that they exist only because people believe in them. Being dependent upon human beliefs and evaluations, social constructs enjoy only a derivative and artificial kind of ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE; still, social constructs are not nothing. For example, a piece of printed paper or embossed metal counts as money for a group of people, but only because those people recognize it as currency for economic exchange. Once it is no longer recognized by a given society as currency, it ceases to be currency for that society. The paper or the metal of the money would not cease being paper or metal because the money ceased being recognized as valid currency. Thus, one might advocate realism about the physical substrate of currency (the paper or the metal) and be a constructionist about its status as money.

Most people assume that some objects are real, that some things exist independently of people's beliefs about them. For example, it is either true or false, regardless of whether a society knows it, that the sun is a flaming ball of gas around which several planets orbit. Against this, the most radical version of social constructionism would claim that REALITY is wholly a product of beliefs. This view seems to be self-refuting, however, because persons, in order to have beliefs producing social constructs, would have to enjoy some real, construction-independent existence. Most people advancing social constructionist

arguments claim that only certain types of things are constructed. (Often those who claim that reality is socially constructed are not making the antirealist ontological claim that reality exists only relative to and dependent upon societal beliefs, but rather the epistemological claim that individuals learn about and interpret reality interpersonally.)

Overt and Covert Constructions. It is rather uncontroversial that some things are social constructs. Though children may not yet realize that money, contracts, and roles such as being a policeman are conventional, adults generally understand this point. These are *overt* constructions. It is also rather uncontroversial that many things—for example, trees, foxes, and the other things of nature—would exist with the natures that they have even without human knowledge of them. *Covert* constructions would include objects that most people in a society falsely think of as independently real, and this is where much of the twenty-first-century debate centers.

Disagreements about constructionism revolve especially around purported covert constructions of features or classes of people. One common, but still controversial, example is the distinction between SEX and GENDER. Although the distinction between the sexes of a given SPECIES identifies the biological categories of male and female, gender has primarily been a grammatical category, for in many languages, nouns are classified as masculine, feminine, or neuter. But recently the term *gender* has been more generally applied to the array of features that are associated with being male or female, and for this reason some people argue that it is a social construction. For example, it seems to be only a matter of social construction to think that little boys should like blue and little girls should like pink. As this example suggests, social constructs often have a "looping" effect, whereby a construct, which is the *effect* of people's beliefs and attitudes, doubles around to become a *cause* of people's beliefs and attitudes: this would be true if a girl prefers pink because she has been socialized into the convention that pink is FEMININE. Constructionists about sex argue that even the distinction between male and female is covertly produced by socially shared categorizations.

A similar argument occurs about race. Some people have held that racial categorizations of people are biologically valid by claiming that there are subspecies or distinct genetic subpopulations of *Homo sapiens*, whereas other people hold that races are purely social constructs. Still others hold that races are social constructs that exploit minor biological variations. Recall that the social construct of currency is built via beliefs about physically real paper and metal; perhaps, in an analogous way, the classification of human beings as "black" or "white" is built via beliefs about certain minor but real biological patterns.

Moral Concerns about Constructs and Constructionism. Often, when someone claims that some category X (e.g., race) is a social construct, they mean more than the ontological claim that X is not independently real. A common insinuation is that the convention of using X as a category is morally bad or unjust and should be undermined through education. Assuming that races are (in whole or in part) social constructs, and given that people's racial beliefs about themselves and others affect their behavior and how they treat others, education undermining belief in race could be beneficial.

There is also a risk in the opposite direction: there can be danger in falsely identifying something as merely conventional that is in fact quite real independently of any social convention. If the sexes really differ in important ways, then convincing people that male and female are mere constructs would do harm. Moreover, sexual differences comprise not only obvious anatomical dissimilarities; being male or female is correlated with differences in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral tendencies that seem to be partially natural rather than wholly socially conditioned. Thus the line between masculine and feminine features that are natural and those that are conventional or constructed is highly unclear. Moreover, even those gender patterns that are constructed often seem, to some extent, either to be based in real sexual differences or to mark sexual differences in a socially useful way. Thus, even if one were to accept the ontological claim that much of gender is constructed, one might reject the insinuation that conventional gender categories and expectations are unjust and should be undermined.

HUMAN NATURE is another important example. If it structures individuals' lives with drives and norms, and if it is what makes one human rather than another type of animal, then dismissing it as a construct could undermine human self-understanding and could excuse base and unjust action. Still, care is required: it is easy to confuse nature with the "second nature" of convention. Perhaps not everything a society takes to be part of human nature or intrinsic to womanhood or manhood truly is.

Catholic moral teaching requires that some moral principles are not merely socially constructed. That one must not bear false witness and that one must worship only God, for example, are considered by Catholic teaching as standards for human action independently of whether they are recognized or honored as such. According to the Catholic moral tradition, some such moral principles are knowable only through revelation, whereas others are knowable by natural reason. Though Catholic teaching requires rejecting a thoroughgoing construc-

tionism about MORALITY, it does not require rejecting all constructionist claims about morality. First, a given society may honor certain rules or norms that are intrinsically wrong. Insofar as their morally binding status is asserted by a given society, such rules or norms would be social constructs (of the covert type). Second, every society invents some moral rules and norms that are neither required by nor in contradiction with those moral standards that obtain independently of human recognition. For example, it is wrong to drive on the left when on a two-way street in the United States. This rule is dependent upon convention or social recognition; however constructed and arbitrary, it obtains as morally binding because it expresses and serves well the principle of protecting human life.

Given that some, but not all, features of the world, morality, and ourselves are socially constructed, and given that it is difficult to distinguish what is conventional from what is either naturally or transcendently real, careful thought is called for. We must seek to know ourselves and the world both so that we can know the TRUTH and so that we can live in the truth, personally and socially.

SEE ALSO NATURAL LAW.

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SOCIAL DARWINISM

The term *social Darwinism* is popularly used to refer to theories that apply the evolutionary theory of Charles DARWIN (1809–1882) or similar theories to human SOCIETY. It is best understood not as a single theory but as a family of linked but sometimes conflicting positions. Social Darwinist theories tend to portray human society in terms of a process that applies throughout the world of living things: a universal *struggle for existence* through *competition* for limited resources and sexual partners, in which *natural selection* ensures that the *fittest* (or, at least, the fit) *survive* and pass on their traits through *inheritance*. Social Darwinism in this sense usually presumes the thesis of biological EVOLUTION—namely, that humans evolved from other species through such a process—and then affirms that human societies change in a way that is continuous with or analogous to the biological process. It is often coupled with a normative position that opposes social-welfare programs that enable the naturally "unfit" to survive and reproduce. Few have adopted the label "social Darwinist" for themselves; more often, it has been a pejorative term employed by opponents of such positions.

The term *social Darwinism* is first attested to in 1879. Some of its earliest proponents meant something quite different from what is understood by the term now. Thus, Émile Gautier's *Le Darwinisme social* (1880) argued that the real thrust of Darwinism was that human society had evolved to the point where mutual aid and group solidarity outweighed the struggle for existence.

The English philosopher Herbert SPENCER (1820–1903) and the American social theorist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) are considered paradigm cases of social Darwinism in the present sense of the term, though neither labeled himself a Darwinist. Spencer had already formulated a theory of evolution and had coined the term *survival of the fittest* before Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859. He praised Darwin for discovering the mechanism by which fitness was determined. For Spencer, the pressure of population on limited resources (an idea that Spencer adopted from Thomas MALTHUS [1766–1834]) pitted species against species and, within a species, individual against individual in a struggle in which the fittest survived. Spencer wrote in *The Study of Sociology* (1873) that warfare was a primary means by which the fitter groups of humans eliminated the less fit, but as society evolved, "industrial" or economic competition replaced warfare as the agent of a "purifying process," leaving "the least capable to disappear gradually, from failing to leave a sufficiently-numerous posterity" (Spencer 1961, 180). This process must not be mitigated by a misguided charity; in particular, the STATE should not intervene in the workings of the free market in order to promote the interests of the sick, poor, or unemployed, and thereby multiply the number of the unfit. To attempt to do so is to violate a law of nature.

Sumner's theory differed from Spencer's in many details, but like his predecessor, he defended economic laissez-faire competition as the agent of human progress. Humans, he said, could not abrogate the law of the survival of the fittest. Related positions were articulated by Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) in Italy, Clémence-Auguste Royer (1830–1902) in France, and Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) in Germany, among others.

Related Theories. Darwin's cousin Francis Galton (1822–1911) adopted Darwin's analogy of stockbreeding