"On Wednesdays we wear pink."

A person fluent in pop culture would be able to associate the reference above immediately with American high school stereotypes: the bimbos who always have the latest gossip, the nerds who sleep in the labs, and the jocks who never let go of their weights. This is an expanded illustration of what Sally Haslanger regards as the seemingly absurd social reality, which I interpreted as a reality formed by beliefs the society holds as a collective entity. In the Mean Girls example above, high schoolers' existences were reduced to mere labels and the connotation that comes with it reveals what the society believes as praiseworthy, forming what we call "social knowledge".

In the equally Regina George sounding paper titled "But mom, crop-tops are cute!" Haslanger presents a more extreme hypothetical situation in which girls are dichotomically categorised into "cute" and "dork". She encapsulates the absurdity of social knowledge and reductionist influence it has over an individual's identity. By doing so, she makes us readers ponder the problems associated with this social knowledge and our motivation for believing in it. Judging from only the extract in the question, the central claim Haslanger is making is that social knowledge is a mere "illusion" which rests on a circular logic between belief and truth. She substantiated this conclusion with 2 premises:

1) It is "socially and morally problematic" to believe in such social knowledge;
2) It reified through a pattern of belief and expectation, it could be undermined by refusing to have beliefs in its terms.

Before doing an evaluation on her argument, it is important to define the keyword in the question. What exactly is social knowledge? Perhaps it is more appropriate to put it as "social knowledge claims", since we do not yet know if they fulfill the tripartite definition of being "justified true beliefs". Earlier on, I interpreted "social reality" as a reality formed by beliefs the society holds as a collective entity. By extension, it is reasonable to say that so-called social knowledge are these very beliefs society holds, produced through relationships and connections with members of the society. This can include beliefs on the relationship between self and others (eg. as a society we believe in respecting one another), the institution and order (eg. as a society we believe in acting lawfully), beauty standard (eg. as a society we believe that girls should not look "dorky"), etcetera. It is easy to spot a pattern here that social knowledge has a certain normative element to it; as a society, we seem to have a common understanding on what is good and what is bad. Hence, the question at hand needs to be answered through both an epistemic and an ethical perspective.

In this essay, I aim to further unpack the premises that led to Haslanger's conclusion. Following that, I will discuss what I see as the most salient contentions in this question: if by being constructivist, a knowledge claim has a weaker epistemic truth.

<u>The First Premise</u>

Haslanger argues that social knowledge is socially and morally "problematic". It can be broadly understood as how social knowledge has detrimental effects on our society, and that the moral problem lies in how the idea of social knowledge contradicts with what we normally perceive as "good" or "moral".

Despite having the term "social" in it, It is not very hard to give reasons to why social knowledge could be detrimental to society. Working on the basis that social knowledge represents the collective beliefs by society, it is prone to the risk of generalisation. Taking the example in the question: cute girls versus dorky girls? But what about sassy girls? Classy girls? The clearly reductionist tendency of social knowledge makes it an arbitrary standard for society to accept. Another common social knowledge could be that we ought to act politely. An example by extension could be that slurping during a meal is bad mannerism. However, in Japan, slurping loudly during a meal means enjoying the food and is seen as a compliment to the chef. Hence, one can argue that social knowledge implies a degree of universality and uniformity and therefore has the tendency to generalise. The resultant of generalisation is the lack of understanding of excluded elements (in this case, cultures), thus negatively impacting society by undermining its cohesiveness. However, one can also argue that each culture forms its own society and "social knowledge" that follows accordingly is applicable to the society only. For instance, the social knowledge of acting politely in the cultural paradigm of Japan might have a different criteria.

Personally, I am inclined to view social knowledge as individual sets of beliefs present in different societies, bearing in mind the vastly different cultural and religious contexts around the world. Nonetheless, I agree with Haslanger and maintain that the concept of social knowledge faces moral backlashes.

The idea of social knowledge having problems associated with morality might not be an intuitive one, especially if one is working on the basis that social knowledge in and of itself represents a normative common understanding of society. I believe that the one precondition that makes social knowledge morally problematic is precisely the imposition of normative evaluation on others. In the cute/dorky dichotomy, we would probably all associate cute with being desirable and dorky with being undesirable. This tacit acknowledgement of what is desirable suggests that the social knowledge has had a normative impact on us whether we liked it or not. Perhaps this moral contention is best explained by Kant in the *Doctrine of Rights*, where he argues that individuals should have the right to pursue their purposes independently of the will of others, together with an

obligation of respecting others' rights to do so. This by having the power to shape our normative evaluations, social knowledge takes away the right of self determination from individuals.

An opponent to my argument can say that even if we have the right to self determine, the decisions and judgements we make will be a result of societal influence. While this is true, having an outright set of social knowledge compromises our experience at figuring out our own beliefs as we would have a tendency to obey what is set out as *the* standard.

<u>The Second Premise</u>

In her second premise, Haslanger shifts the attention to the epistemic side of the issue. Namely, she suggests that there is a circular logic in why social knowledge is being accepted. She explains it with the example: "*it is true that p so you should believe p; but believing p makes it true, and it would be better if p weren't true; so you shouldn't believe p.*"

In the first part of the statement, she suggests that the reason for believing in social knowledge is the "truth" in it but the "truthfulness" of the knowledge is derived precisely from having people believing in it. This raises the question of whether truth can exist independently of belief and whether believing in something makes it more true.

On the question of the independence of truth and belief, I argue that while it is possible for truth to exist independently of belief and vice versa, Haslanger generalised the motivation to believe in something as only whether it is true.

Truth can exist independently of belief. This resembles the correspondence theory of truth first brought up by Russell and Moore. The correspondence theory suggests that the criteria of something being true is whether it is "fact-checked" by reality, or as Descartes put it, "denotes conformity of thought with its subject". Whether you believe it or not, humans need oxygen to sustain our lives. Whether you believe it or not, my brother just came into my room and gave me a judgemental glare, provided that it is factual that I indeed have a room and a brother who is capable of glaring at me. Similarly, beliefs can exist independently of truth: If I were colourblind, I would believe that the sky is green, a clearly false statement.

Truth and belief can exist independently of each other, unlike the circular relation Haslanger suggested. Moreover, our motivation for believing something does not always depend on the element of truth in it. This is especially the case in social knowledge, a clearly constructed notion. Social knowledge can be understood as constructivist knowledge as they are the result of cultural, historical, sometimes religious influences, instead of being the result of an objective reality. For example, a Chinese society under the influence of

Confucianism would see filial piety as a social knowledge. But who is to say that the goodness in filial piety is objectively true?

We can even go a step further to say that precisely due to its constructivist nature, we cannot apply a typical measure of objectivity to assess how "true" a social knowledge claim is. Instead, the conventional epistemic bar could be lowered for social knowledge, that the tripartite definition of "justified true beliefs" could afford to relax the "true" element--that as long as the belief can the justified, it can pass off as a social "knowledge"

The second part of the same premise, Haslanger suggests that a reason for people to give up on the belief is that "it would be better if p weren't true". Here, she hints at how the pragmatic theory of truth could be used to explain the motivation behind believing in social knowledge. According to William James, one of the prominent proponents of the theory, truth can be defined in terms of utility. If we were to take this argument, the epistemic properties of social knowledge could in fact be conveniently strengthened, as utility could be both the justification to the knowledge claim as well as a tool in justifying its truth. For instance, a social knowledge claim that there are cute and dorky girls has a certain degree of utility to it as it conveniently categorised the female species into two types. And in the very cynical world where this is true, it would greatly benefit fashion and make up brands as they will have a clear direction when packaging their products to appeal to different types of girls. This goes on to churn the machine of capitalism and voila, it is useful for economic growth and overall prosperity of the world. Similarly, if a social knowledge is not useful to believe in, it makes it untrue and gives abandoning it a reasonable justification. A clear problem with this point of view would be how exactly utility can be defined, and the existence of useful but false beliefs. Again, in the latter case one can always say that the unique constructivist nature of social knowledge makes its failure to adhere to objective truth a forgivable one.

Conclusion

In this essay, I dissected Sally Haslanger's argument in the paper (insert title). By analysing the premises of her argument, I proved that the social detriments that social knowledge poses can be reconciled if we view the existence of such knowledge in specific cultural paradigms, nonetheless, the moral backlashes social knowledge faces cannot be disregarded. In analysing her second premise, I weaved in the discussion of social knowledge being constructivist in nature and therefore altering the conventional standard of "justified true beliefs". While doing so, I refuted Haslanger's implication that truth and belief cannot exist independently, but agreeing with her that the pragmatic theory of truth is applicable to social knowledge. Stepping out of philosophical analysis, I personally view social knowledge in an existentialist lens. Just like Sartre, I believe that we are first human, then everything else society wants us to be. Nonetheless, the importance of institutions and having an *orderly* society is becoming increasingly obvious in this time of crisis. Hopefully,

philosophy can yield a meaningful perspective to the reconciliation between the society and the individual.