

Social Kinds: A User's Manual

by

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Acknowledgments

There is a passage from Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* that always strikes a chord with me: "Writing turns you into somebody who's always wrong. The illusion that you may get it right someday is the perversity that draws you on. What else could?" Mix writing with philosophy and the perversity increases exponentially. However, it is also the people around you that help you to persist, in particular when facing difficult times. I would like then to take this chance to thank all the people who helped me in this endeavor. First of all, I want to thank Neil Williams, whose courses on metaphysics, natural kinds, and social ontology, together with our many conversations, inspired me to develop the view that I defend in this dissertation. I also want to thank him for the support he has continued to give me during my PhD. I want to thank Ryan Muldoon for making me see political and social issues in different and new ways, and with a more careful and attentive eye. I give thanks to Barry Smith who, despite not wanting to be called a philosopher anymore, definitely helped me to become a better one myself. I also want to thank LaTonia Lattimore and Theresa Monacelli for helping me navigate through all the university bureaucracy.

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I dedicate my thesis to the loving memory of Pierluigi Pedrazzi and my grandparents.

Abstract

This is a dissertation in social ontology, whose goal is to defend a constructivist account of social kinds. First, I show how there is no fully satisfactory characterization or definition of the social, but that we can rely on an intuitive understanding on which entities count as social entities. Second, I clarify what I mean by ‘social category’ or ‘social kind,’ which I define as a partition of entities that bear and share certain social properties. Third, I argue against what I call ‘Natural Boundaries Realism,’ the view according to which there are at least some social kinds that are not constructed. Fourth, I develop my constructivist account, claiming that social kinds are concepts, and showing several ways in which they are created. Fifth, I argue that social kinds may be natural kinds, and that the Stable Property Cluster account of natural kinds is the one that best accommodates the existence of social kinds that are also natural kinds. Finally, I show how values may play a role in the making of social kinds, and how my constructive account accommodates these normative inputs.

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Introduction

What is in our head, and what is out there? Arguably, this is the main question metaphysicians have been engaged with, and long before Kant made the problem particularly salient with his Copernican Revolution in philosophy. Metaphysicians are especially invested in discerning classifications of entities that, to use the Platonic jargon, ‘carve nature at its joints’ from classifications of entities that are the result of conventions. In other words, we could say that metaphysicians argue about which categories or kinds - I use the two terms synonymously - exist independently of our thought and which exist as the product of our mind. Social ontology, being a part of metaphysics, is not exempt from this issue. The most prevalent view in the field has always been that social reality is the example of the product of our intentionality *par excellence*, as are the categories through which the inhabitants of the social world are classified, whether these denizens are people, as in the case of *Member of Parliament* or *refugee*, or that these denizens are things, as in the case of *border* or *money*.¹ However, in the last two decades, several philosophers have challenged this dominant view by giving a different account of social kinds, according to which many, if not all, social categories exist without being created by our mind. A driving motivation for this line of reasoning lies in the need to account for how social sciences are able to rely on the explanatory and inductive power of the categories that seems to be grounded in mind-independent reality rather than in mere convention.

The view I have set out to defend clarifies the terms of the debate and lies in between these two different approaches. What I argue is that, on the one hand, it is

¹ A maybe superfluous, but quick note: the words denoting kinds are italicized, whereas words denoting their instances are not.

indeed us who devise and, over time, bring change to social kinds, which are ultimately an artificial instrument; a compass to help orient us around the social world. On the other hand, the fact that we come up with social kinds does not always entail that anything goes, since there are both empirical and normative constraints to how we can represent the social world, making some categories better tools than others. Thus, the endeavor of understanding the nature of social kinds amounts to walking a tightrope; if you cast a sidelong glance on one side you will see what is in our head, whereas if you cast it on the other side, you will see what is outside of it. This exercise in philosophical funambulism behooves me to tread carefully and keep my balance on this risky path. Having said that, I hope this metaphor does not give the reader the false impression that what I am trying to do is reach a forced compromise between two views for the sake of seeking a synthesis between two opposing and (apparently) irreconcilable views. To be clear, this is merely how I found things to stand on the matter of social kinds.

Without further ado, here is how the dissertation is structured. In the first chapter, I address the question of what it means for a thing to be social. After examining and evaluating existing and competing accounts of the matter, I argue that none of them aptly characterize or define 'social.' However, I ultimately conclude that the lack of a fully-fledged definition is no obstacle to our intuitive understanding of what counts as social.

In the second chapter, I first explain why categories are so important to philosophical inquiry. I then proceed to list four different questions that must be answered if we want to give an account of social kinds: the semantic question, asking what we mean by the phrase 'social kind'; the ontological question, asking about the existence of social kinds; the constitutive question, asking what social kinds are made

of, and the origin question, asking how social kinds come into existence. Only by first answering the semantic question and fixing the referent of our investigation can we proceed and answer the other four questions. I therefore fully address only the semantic question, by stating that by ‘social kind’ I mean a partition of entities that bear and share certain social properties. I argue that this is a good definition as it is metaphysically neutral, and it dispels some confusion that may arise by conflating social kinds with social groups and social objects.

In the third chapter, I present what I call ‘Natural Boundaries Realism’ (NBR), which opposes constructivism as it claims that at least some social kinds are not constructed. First, I clarify that the realism at issue here is not ontological realism, according to which social kinds exist, as this is something most social ontologists agree upon. I give some arguments in favor of ontological realism, thereby answering the ontological question. I then argue against NBR in two steps. First, I reject the main argument for NBR, according to which social kinds, such as *economic recession* and *racism*, are not constructed, because there would be economic recessions and racism regardless of our acknowledgement of their existence and nature. I contend that this argument confuses social kinds with social objects. Second, I address the vagueness of social kind boundaries in NBR. This vagueness poses a dilemma for realists because they must accept it as either ontic or epistemic, but both options are problematic.

In the fourth chapter, I answer the constitutive question, and the origin question, building the core of my constructivist account of social kinds. I answer the constitutive question by treating social kinds as concepts and by examining and rejecting a traditional metaphysical answer, which would be to treat social kinds as universals - a handy solution indeed (as it is often the case when it comes to universals). However, I

argue that this type of solution cannot be applied in this case because, as we saw, social kinds are artificial, and, as such, they cannot be abstract entities. I then give my own account, according to which social kinds are concepts. Finally, I answer the origin question, by offering what I call a 'well-tempered pluralism' regarding the creation of social kinds. The idea is that social categories are brought into existence either through collective acceptance, as for example when a legislature makes new laws, or through social practices, as for example when certain norms are established. I also argue that the categories created through collective acceptance can then be modified by our practices (or again, by new instances of collective acceptance) and the categories that arose out of practices may then be modified by collective acceptance (or again, by new practices). This view is a form of pluralism because it holds that there is no single and unifying formula showing how social kinds are put into place. However, it is well-tempered because there are only two ways in which we can set up social kinds and also in which we possibly bring change to them: either through acts of collective acceptance, or through established practices. Finally, I defend anti-realism from recent attacks.

Having laid out the metaphysical core of my account, I discuss how some social kinds can be natural kinds, when they permit scientific induction. Several accounts of natural kinds hold that what grants induction is the causality binding together the properties associated with the category. However, there are social kinds that allow for scientific induction, but whose properties are not causally related, for example, linguistic kinds and legal kinds. If that is the case, then we must ground the projectability of the categories into something else. Following the Stable Property Account (SPC) of natural kinds, I claim that it is the stability of the properties belonging to the kind that grant the strength of the induction.

In the last chapter, I discuss social kinds and ‘value-ladenness.’ I argue that there are two ways in which values may play a role. One is by there being normative properties associated with a kind (e.g., *terrorist*), the other one is by guiding the tracing of the boundaries (e.g., *well-being*). I shall show that from the fact that certain decisions are of a normative nature it does not necessarily follow that a social kind is associated with normative properties. Finally, I argue that my constructivist account accommodates the role of value in the making of social kinds better than any approach that has an underlying NBR metaphysics.

CHAPTER 1

What Counts as Social?

We all understand that things like concerts, graduations, and weddings are social phenomena. However, what does it mean for a thing to be social; that is, what counts as social? Surprisingly, the question has not received the attention it deserves in social ontology or in the philosophy of social science; few works directly address the issue, and those that do present competing accounts. It is important to tackle the question in order to distinguish social kinds from non-social kinds. That is why this chapter examines and evaluates five such competing accounts: the separability thesis, Émile Durkheim's account, 'social' as grounded by second-order mental states, 'social' as the subject matter of social sciences, and 'social' as human. I argue that while none of these constitute a satisfactory account of the social, formal definitions and criteria are not required for our formulation of substantive accounts of social entities. Rather, our intuitive understandings of what counts as social are sufficient.

1.1 The Separability Thesis

A current way of understanding the social is by pitting it against the natural. Let us call this the 'separability thesis,' which is roughly the view that the social lies outside the domain of the natural and is thus metaphysically separate from it. This perspective has intuitive appeal and simplicity on its side. The thesis originates in the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who posit that the state of nature—an arrangement that preexists the formation of social collectives based on the

social contract—is radically separate from society. A stark contrast between the natural and the social also emerges in the views of several philosophers who draw inspiration from the work of Karl Marx. They hold that we falsely regard the power relations governing the social world as natural and therefore inevitable and unchangeable from a descriptive and normative standpoint, even when such relations are the products of historical dynamics that can and ought to be changed. This is also the goal of what Sally Haslanger calls the ‘debunking project’, which involves demonstrating that certain categories portrayed as natural are actually social constructs.²

The weakness of the separability thesis is that it functions as an assumption rather than a conclusion to a sound argument. Of course, any theory includes assumptions, but this is a costly one; and because it contravenes the ontological principle of parsimony by presenting the social world as over and above the natural world, the burden of proving its viability lies with its supporters, not its detractors. In response to this critique, one might argue that the subject matter of the natural sciences is very different from that of the social sciences. While this is true, it does not follow that society is extraneous to nature. At the same time, there is nothing to prevent us from treating the social world as an independent domain of inquiry or from arguing for the use of similar methods in both the natural and the social sciences in the same way that physics and biology, as separate disciplines, both take natural phenomena as their subject matter. That said, denying the separability thesis does imply that we should avoid discussing society as a separate reality. Moreover, even if the separability thesis held true, it would not solve the issue at hand, because it would nonetheless lack criteria for distinguishing what is social from what is natural.

² Haslanger 2003.

1.2 Durkheim's Account

Durkheim, the first to explicitly raise the issue of delineating the contours of the social, provides a more detailed and precise account of the social in his seminal work *The Rules of the Sociological Method*. To do his work justice, we should note that Durkheim's philosophical goal was to provide methodological elucidation in the manner of a heuristic tool for assisting sociologists in recognizing social facts, not to give a full metaphysical account of the social.³

In the first chapter of *Rules*, Durkheim argues that social facts are “manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him.”⁴ This account does rule out some individual psychological phenomena from being social, which meets Durkheim's methodological aim of distinguishing individual psychology from sociology. However, external coercive power is not a necessary condition for something to be social since not all social phenomena involve coercion. For instance, a party among friends is a social phenomenon that does not (normally) require coercive power in order to take place. However, a careful reading of Durkheim reveals that ‘coercive power’ includes not only the use or threat of force but also any kind of incurred repercussion or resistance,

³ This important caveat stands out clearly in the preface to the second edition of *Rules* in a passage where Durkheim replies to a variety of critical objections to his account: “What we set out to do was not to anticipate the conclusions of the discipline by stating a philosophical view, but merely to indicate how, by outward signs, it is possible to identify the facts that the science must deal with, so that the social scientist may learn how to pick out their location and not to confuse them with other facts. It was intended to mark out the field of research as clearly as possible, and not for philosophy and sociology to embrace each other in some kind of comprehensive intuition. Thus we readily admit the charge that this definition does not express all aspects of the social fact and consequently that it is not the sole possible one” (Durkheim 1895, 13).

⁴ It is important to highlight that ‘fact’ is a technical term in metaphysics, denoting a particular type of entity, whereas Durkheim's usage is looser, denoting a multiplicity of metaphysically distinct sorts of entities, such as actions and powers (it does not seem to include groups).

including public ridicule and rejection, consequent upon the violation of a given norm.⁵ As such, rather than ‘coercive power’ it is more appropriate to refer to ‘external constraint’ as Durkheim himself does, in our consideration of the two other definitions of social fact with which he concludes the first chapter of *Rules*:

Our definition will therefore subsume all that has to be defined if it states:

A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint;

or:

which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations.

Durkheim 1895, 27

According to Durkheim, characterizing a social fact in terms of external constraints on individuals is the same as characterizing it in terms of generality, namely, how widespread it is in each group; he regarded the two definitions as equivalent.⁶ However, these are not merely different formulations of the same statement. Even if it were true that in any society there are no external constraints without generality and vice versa,

⁵ He continues: “In other cases the constraint is less violent; nevertheless, it does not cease to exist. If I do not conform to ordinary conventions, if in my mode of dress I pay no heed to what is customary in my country and in my social class, the laughter I provoke, the social distance at which I am kept, produce, although in a more mitigated form, the same results as any real penalty. In other cases, although it may be indirect, constraint is no less effective. I am not forced to speak French with my compatriots, nor to use the legal currency, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise. If I tried to escape the necessity, my attempt would fail miserably” (Durkheim 1895, 21).

⁶ Further: “[...] this second definition is simply another formulation of the first one: if a mode of behaviour existing outside the consciousnesses of individuals becomes general, it can only do so by exerting pressure upon them” (Durkheim 1895, 25).

the properties of external constraints and generalities are different, and this divergence is sufficient to reject their equivalence. More precisely, even if ‘being able to exert an external constraint’ and ‘being general’ have the same extension, their intension is not the same.⁷

Setting this flaw aside, we could allow that the definitions are conjunctive rather than disjunctive, that is, any social fact is jointly characterized by its exertion of external constraint and its generality. However, this account is too inclusive. As Greenwood points out, externality and constraint are properties of facts that are also studied by other sciences: “[...] they are properties shared by all the objects of psychological, biological, and physical sciences: by other psychological beings, Golgi bodies, hydrochloric acids, ball bearings, and electromagnetic fields”.⁸

The problem of overly inclusive definitions is common to other studies. For example, Philip Pettit argues that a certain property is social “in case its realization requires that ‘several individuals evince intentional responses: they display certain attitudes or perform certain actions, at the same time or at different times.’”⁹ Pettit himself admits that this definition is too wide but that it serves the purpose of defending ‘holistic individualism.’ Walter Wallace’s view suffers from a similar drawback in that it defines a social phenomenon as “an interorganismic behavior regularity—that is, any set of non-random co-occurrences in time and/or space of two or more organisms’ behaviours,” thereby erroneously admitting a variety of biological phenomena under the category of the social.¹⁰

⁷ See the classic distinction between the coextensive properties ‘being a chordate’ (being an animal with a heart) and ‘being a renate’ (being an animal with a kidney) (Quine 1951).

⁸ Greenwood 2003, 94.

⁹ Pettit 1993, 119.

¹⁰ Wallace 1997, 38.

1.3 Social as Grounded by Second-Order Mental States

In the process of criticizing Durkheim, Greenwood nonetheless aims to build upon Durkheim's view by providing an account of social phenomena, as per the following:

Social forms of cognition, emotion and behavior can be characterized as forms of cognition, emotion, and behavior held or engaged because and on condition that members of a population are represented as holding or engaging in these (or other) forms of cognition, emotion, and behavior in particular circumstances.¹¹ (Greenwood 2003, 101)

Take, for instance, Greenwood's example of the Catholic devotee who holds the belief that abortion is morally wrong. This belief is held 'individually' if the believer holds it regardless of what other Catholics think about the matter and if they acquired it based on rational argument. However, the very same belief is held 'socially' if it was acquired because other Catholics are represented as holding it. Equally, beliefs may be held both individually and socially, for example, when the Catholic's belief that abortion is morally wrong is held in part because they were rationally persuaded and in part because they represented other Catholics in deeming it immoral. What makes a certain belief social is, accordingly, not the content of the belief but its relation to other second-order mental states. The same applies to behavior and emotion: it is not what the behavior consists of

¹¹ Greenwood calls his account 'Durkheimian,' but I find it more Weberian in spirit because of the social-making role of beliefs, which is also presented in Max Weber's notion of social action: "By 'action' is meant human behaviour linked to a subjective meaning on the part of the actor or actors concerned; such action may be either overt, or occur inwardly—whether by positive action, or by refraining from action, or by tolerating a situation. Such behavior is "social" action where the meaning intended by the actor or actors is related to the behaviour of others, and the action is so oriented" (Weber 1921-22, 78-9).

or what the emotion expresses but how behavior and emotion are being affected by the second-order mental states possessed by an individual.

Mark Champagne (2012) points out that Greenwood's grounding of his account of the social in a given person's attitude toward a certain belief, emotion, or behavior renders it unpalatably psychologistic. According to Champagne, the problematic consequence of conditioning something as being social on certain second-order mental states is that it allows the possibility of a 'lone social actor' who represents other members of a certain group as acting, feeling, or thinking in a certain way, when no such group in fact exists. However, I do not find this objection particularly troubling for Greenwood's account, to the extent that it can accommodate the cognitive fallibility of a social actor, given that it is not limited to a person's factive mental state. My concern with Greenwood's account is opposite to Champagne's and also opposite to my worry with Durkheim's; that is, I find it too exclusive rather than too inclusive. Consider, for example, an act such as suicide. Presumably, a proportion of people commit suicide for reasons other than the representation of other people who belong to a certain group that commits suicide. Still, ruling out a phenomenon like suicide as non-social goes against our intuitions as well as the wealth of studies that treat the matter as an eminently social phenomenon (e.g., Durkheim's monography on suicide, a foundational study in sociology).¹²

One might reply that according to Greenwood (as quoted above), other people are "represented as holding or engaging in these (*or other*) forms of cognition, emotion,

¹² Durkheim 1897. Similarly, Margaret Gilbert criticizes Weber because, among other things, suicide does not fall under his notion of social action, (Gilbert 1989, 44-51). This is another reason I find Greenwood's account closer to the Weberian definition of social action than to the Durkheimian account of social fact.

and behavior” (101; italics mine), and as such, the person committing suicide might represent other people engaging in a different kind of activity. However, take the following statement that is supposed to clarify what Greenwood means by ‘other’:

The reference to ‘other’ forms of thinking, feeling, and acting is designed to cover instances of cooperative, competitive, and combative forms of thought, feeling, and behavior: where I push (only) when you pull; where I return (only) when you serve; where I fight you (only) when you insult me, and so forth.

Greenwood 2003, 109

This specification still does not sufficiently include acts such as suicide, as they do not necessarily involve the representation of other people engaging in cooperative, competitive, or combative behavior.

We can raise a similar worry to Margaret Gilbert’s account of the social. Gilbert does not give an actual definition like Greenwood does, but she indicates what is in her view the paradigm of what counts as social phenomena. This paradigmatic view defines sociality as occurring when people consider themselves “plural subjects,” that is, when they are jointly committed to for example a certain action or belief, such as when two people decide to take a walk together. According to Gilbert, other phenomena can have a degree of sociality, as determined by how close they come to the paradigm of the plural subject.¹³ The problem with this account is similar to the one with Greenwood’s in that it relegates to the derivatively and only partially social those phenomena that are central

¹³ See in particular Gilbert (1997).

to social scientists' inquiry such as consumer behavior or informal institutions but do not involve a joint commitment.

1.4 Social as the Subject Matter of Social Sciences

It has been famously argued by Paul Oppenheim and Hilary Putnam (1958) that the whole edifice of science must be seen as hierarchical, where different sciences are dealt with at different levels, ranging from the lowest to the highest, to which all the lower levels are in principle reducible. The level of the social is the lowest level in this hierarchy of the sciences. Now, this view that sciences can be arranged into reducible levels has several issues, as raised in particular by Jerry Fodor (1974). However, let us grant that this division of levels holds and suppose that what is social is what is studied at the level of the social sciences.

While this view has merit in proposing sufficient conditions for counting something as social, the idea that something qualifies as social only if or when it is taken up by social science is counterintuitive. There is good reason to think, for example, that the social kind *taxpayer* had social properties before fiscal sociology emerged as a field of study. Moreover, this account illegitimately rules out numerous categories of a clearly social nature, owing to the ostensibly limited explanatory or inductive power of such categories. For example, *graduate philosophy student specializing in Kantian aesthetics* may not be (now or ever) a particularly useful category for the basis of scientific investigation. Nonetheless, people in this category are characterized by the social properties they all bear, such as being accepted into the graduate philosophy program at a university, having a dissertation advisor, being a Kantian scholar, and so forth.

Brian Epstein's stance toward social kinds in *The Ant Trap* offers a modified version of this view. He argues that "it is useful to think of [social kinds] as the categories we might use in the social sciences".¹⁴ While the modal auxiliary 'might' solve the problem of omitting social kinds (such as *taxpayer* prior to the emergence of fiscal sociology) that have not been studied by the social sciences, the claim is still rather vague. What, in this context, is the modal space of 'might'? Would it include 'graduate philosophy student specializing in Kantian aesthetics,' given the remote possibility that this kind will come to gain a particularly important epistemic role in the social sciences? Moreover, social sciences' resorting to the borrowing of kinds from non-social sciences does not automatically make those kinds social (for example, the kind *synapse*, borrowed from neuroscience).¹⁵

1.5 Social as Human

The term 'human kind' has gained currency in recent decades owing to Hacking's work on interactive kinds.¹⁶ Much of the debate on social kinds overlaps with debate on human kinds. Given that overlap and the close proximity of the two discourses, it is tempting to identify what is social by what is human, resorting to the conceptual apparatus related to human kinds or human categories that are already well established in the literature. One issue with this approach is that numerous species of non-human animals—from ants to primates—socially organize themselves for existence and survival purposes. Correspondingly, sociobiology forms an entire subfield of biology devoted to

¹⁴ Epstein 2015, 68.

¹⁵ One can adjust the view to this objection by saying that the kinds must be the central subjects of the social sciences, and not merely used by them.

¹⁶ In particular, Hacking 1995.

investigating animal social behavior in evolutionary terms. Furthermore, if we focus specifically on social categories, *dominant male* appears to be a social kind among certain non-human animals.¹⁷ Moreover, even if, contrary to science, it turns out that no non-human animals exhibit social traits, the fact that only humans possess organized societies would merely constitute a contingent fact. It is straightforward to conceive of sufficiently similar animals evolving to become social creatures like humans. Finally, the expression ‘human kinds’ is ambiguous in that it can refer to biological human kinds as well as social human kinds. *Human heart* seems to be human kind; it is related to human beings just as much as *licensed doctor* is related to human beings. We generally consider social kinds and not biological or medical kinds when we think about human kinds. Yet not everything that pertains to humanity is also social: ‘human’ and ‘social’ are not coextensive terms.

1.6 Relying on Our Intuitions

No fully satisfactory proposal has emerged from this survey of the various accounts of the social. However, I maintain that while better accounts of the social are desirable, a fully-fledged account is altogether dispensable. Our intuitions as to what does and does not count as social are readily available and sufficiently robust to carry the weight of philosophical and scientific arguments. The majority of philosophers and scientists omit a clear definition of the social or appear doubtful about the prospect of providing an enlightening definition, but this gap presents no obstacle to the formulation of substantive accounts of social entities. Of course, it is not always clear whether we

¹⁷ See Ereshefsky 2004, according to which there are no significant differences between biological and human kinds

should take certain entities as social or not. For example, in the late 19th century, for many sociologists, ‘the crowd’ was a paradigmatic case of a social phenomenon.¹⁸ But, for some contemporary philosophers, crowds lack the features that make things social.¹⁹ That being said, I use ‘intuitions’ here to refer to beliefs that we are immediately disposed to hold rather than to self-evident truths; accordingly, intuitions may clash. Universal agreement concerning every example of a social kind is not required. We need only agree that things like crime and unemployment are social phenomena and that things like electromagnetic pulses and volcanic eruptions are not.²⁰

¹⁸ See for example Le Bon 1895.

¹⁹ See for example Gilbert 1989.

²⁰ Haslanger presents a similar strategy: “I’m not going to be able to give a theory of ‘the social, or what makes something social.’ I think it is unlikely that there is a non-circular definition; the best we can hope to do is give a focal analysis that treats certain cases as central for the purposes of the account and explains how other cases are related” (Haslanger 2016, 16).

CHAPTER 2

What We Talk About When We Talk About Social Kinds

After having argued for an intuitive understanding of the social, it is now time to define the term ‘social kind.’ In the first place, I explain why categories are an essential object of philosophical inquiry. Subsequently, I claim that there are four questions we must ask about social kinds if we want to give a full account of them: the semantic question, the ontological question, the constitutive question, and the origin question. I deal with the semantic question - which is preliminary to the other ones - in this chapter, whereas I leave the other questions to be addressed later in the dissertation. I argue that we ought to construe ‘social kinds’ in terms of a partition of entities – persons or things – according to a commonality of shared social properties. I claim that this account has the advantage of dispelling the confusion that may arise by way of conflating social kinds with social groups and social objects.

2.1 What Borges Can Teach Us About Classification

If I had to make a guess, Jorge Luis Borges would be one of the most quoted fictional writers in contemporary philosophy. The reason is simple: many of the short stories written by the Argentinian author not only draw inspiration from his ample knowledge of philosophical literature, but they also provide helpful insights into a wide range of philosophical issues. For our purposes, there are at least three of his short stories that address, among other things, the topic of classification: *Funes*, *His Memory*, *On*

Exactitude in Science, and *The Analytic Language of John Wilkins*. All these works brilliantly depict the nature and role of categories as tools to know the world.

In *Funes, His Memory*, the narrator (an alter ego of Borges himself) tells us about his encounters in Uruguay with Ireneo Funes, a man who, after receiving a head injury falling off his horse, acquires an unprecedented memory. Not only is the eponymous protagonist capable of recalling every single detail of his life since his accident, he is also capable of doing it in an extremely vivid manner. His memory and perception are so extraordinary that he can recreate in his mind the entirety of details from any time in his life.

However, something that would appear to many as a prodigious gift, turns out to be a terrible curse. Instead of hugely improving his intellectual abilities, this superhuman memory and perception critically impair them. The reason is that this condition makes Funes able to conceive only the particular, while being unable to generate general ideas about the world. Overwhelmed with the immensely vast array of different properties that the world displays - those that ordinary people can merrily neglect - Funes has a hard time subsuming things under the same category, as we would normally do. As the narrator tells us:

Not only was it difficult for him to see that the generic symbol “dog” took in all the dissimilar individuals of all shapes and sizes, it irritated him that the “dog” of three-fourteen in the afternoon, seen in profile, should be indicated by the same noun as the dog of three-fifteen, seen frontally.

Borges 1942, 136

Thus, not only Funes finds it hard to use the same category for objects that are spatially distinct and qualitatively similar, but he also struggles to recognize a certain entity as the same over time, such as the dog seen at three fourteen in profile and the dog seen frontally at three fifteen. Given the principle of indiscernibility of identicals, according to which if *A* and *B* are identical, then everything that is true of *A* is true of *B*, philosophers debate if and when identity over time is preserved. But besides this ‘strict philosophical sense’ of identity there is always a cognitively indispensable ‘loose and popular’ one – as Joseph Butler drew the distinction²¹ – that governs our everyday practice of individuating things; something that Funes seems to have irremediably lost because of his crowded memory. As Borges tells us, Funes is unable to think, because “To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract. In the teeming world of Ireneo Funes, there was nothing but particulars – and they were virtually *immediate* particulars almost.”²²

Although not focusing as explicitly as *Funes, His Memory* on the topic of categories, the one-paragraph story *On Exactitude in Science* throws a similar philosophical light on the matter. Borges tells us about a fictional empire where cartography has reached over time such a degree of perfection that maps of provinces occupy the space of an entire city and maps of the empire occupy the space of entire provinces. Cartographers eventually resolved to improve their art by building a map of the empire that would coincide with the empire itself. Later generations realized how useless the map was, and, without taking care of it anymore, abandoned it.

²¹ Butler 1736, 298-299.

²² Borges 1942, 137.

Just as a gigantic 1:1 scale map is not only extremely inconvenient, but also useless, a detailed description of every single entity of the world is not only practically unattainable but completely worthless from our human perspective. We need handy classifications to know and understand the universe, hence categories are supposed to be practical and sensible ways to partition the world into groups of entities sharing certain properties.

A different feature of classifications is shown instead in the oft-quoted *The Analytic Language of John Wilkins*. Here, while describing the monumental but failed attempt by 17th century English philosopher John Wilkins to create a universal language, Borges mentions a taxonomy found in a fictitious Chinese encyclopedia called *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* dividing animals into “(a) those that belong to the emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s-hair brush, (l) etcetera, (m) those that have just broken the flower vase, (n) those that at a distance resemble flies.”²³

This is a famously absurd taxonomy that we would never want to find in any decent biology book because of what we would consider an utterly chaotic arbitrariness.²⁴ However, despite the oddity of this list of animals, it is a taxonomy nonetheless. What Borges wants to tell us is that all taxonomies, even the best ones, are as arbitrary as the one found in the Chinese encyclopedia, which is only an extreme case.

²³ Borges 1952, 231.

²⁴ Although heterogeneous and strange taxonomies lack epistemic value, they may indeed have an aesthetic value: on the topic of list as an expressive technique in figurative art and literature, see Eco 2009.

[...] obviously there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and speculative. The reason is quite simple: we do not know what the universe is. “This world,” wrote Hume, “was only the first rude essay of some infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work of only some dependent, inferior deity, and is the object of derision to his superiors; it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity, and ever since his death has run on...” (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* V [1779]). We must go even further, and suspect that there is no universe in the organic, unifying sense of that ambitious word. If there is, then we must speculate on its purpose; we must speculate on the words, definitions, etymologies, and synonymies of God’s secret dictionary.

The impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe cannot, however, dissuade us from planning human schemes, even though it is clear that they are provisional.

Borges 1952, 231

Whether there are only arbitrary categories is not a matter for our concern. However, whether there are only arbitrary social categories will be a central issue of this dissertation. Let us leave it here for now. What is certain, and what should be taken from all of these short stories, is that at least some of the ways we classify the objects inhabiting the universe prove to be arbitrary and tentative, but they are nevertheless the result of an epistemically important and inescapable human activity.

But enough with Uruguayan savants, abnormal maps, and weird encyclopedias. Let us now try to figure out a definition for ‘social kind.’

2.2 Four Questions About Social Kinds

If we want to give an account of social kinds we must ask the right questions. After all, a widespread refrain is that philosophy is more about asking the right questions than giving the right answers,²⁵ and the right question is not the Socratic-sounding ‘what is a social kind?’, at least if we do not take it in its traditional use. Take for example the question ‘What is a human being?’ and answer it with the Aristotelian definition, a ‘rational animal.’ Now, it may be argued that in their field, metaphysicians are supposed to parallel this kind of answer, aiming at providing definitions that give the necessary and sufficient conditions for a certain kind of thing to be that thing. However, the Aristotelian definition ‘rational animal’ needs further clarification of what ‘rational’ is and what ‘animal’ is, and even if we provided this type of full taxonomy, that would not be enough to have a satisfying theory of human beings, even from a merely biological perspective. As we saw, classifications are helpful tools, but we do not get to know much about biology by merely reading taxonomies. Moreover, it is an unwarranted assumption that all or even most kinds of entities (in this case, kinds of kinds) have essences with individually necessary and jointly sufficient properties.

Having said that, there are four questions that have to be asked about social kinds in order to have a minimal account of social kinds: the semantic question, the existential question, the constitutive question, and the origin question. The idea of differentiating questions comes from the literature on natural kinds. It is helpful to resort to P.D. Magnus’ (2014) distinction between the taxonomy question, concerning the difference between natural kinds and other kinds, and the ontology question, regarding how a

²⁵ Since it appears to me like a descriptive statement disguised as prescriptive statement, I have always found this metaphilosophical commonplace more depressing than encouraging.

particular kind constitutes a unity. Additionally, Neil Williams (2018) considers another way to understand these questions: the taxonomy question asks what natural kinds are, while the ontology question asks what natural kinds consist of. For example, by answering the taxonomy question we might say that natural kinds are those that serve some explanatory and inductive purposes, whereas by answering the ontology question we might say that some natural kinds, such as chemical kinds, have essences, whereas other natural kinds, such as biological kinds, have homeostatic property clusters.

Just as this distinction helps to dispel some confusion in the literature on natural kinds, asking distinct questions about the nature of social kinds turns out to be equally useful. Let us begin with what I called the semantic question, analogous to the taxonomy question insofar as it asks what distinguishes social kinds from other kinds. I prefer to call it a semantic question rather than a taxonomy question because its goal is to merely elucidate the meaning of the term ‘social kind.’ I argue that we ought to construe social kinds as partitions of entities that bear and share certain social properties. Kinds differ from properties as they are instantiated by individual entities, whereas instances of properties are instantiated by property instances. This is obviously not all that can be said about social kinds, but the point of answering the semantic question is to clarify the referent of our philosophical investigation. In the next section I will explore in more detail the rationale for this definition.

Let us now move on to the second question, which I call the ‘ontological question’ in order to distinguish it from the ontology question about natural kinds.²⁶ This question is about whether social kinds exist or not, and it needs to be answered in the positive if

²⁶ I know that ‘ontological question’ is not so very different from ‘ontology question,’ but the alternatives are ‘existence question’ or ‘existential question,’ and they sound too... existentialist.

we are to address the subsequent questions about the origin and constitution of social kinds. One might wonder if we are putting the cart before the horse by tackling the ontological question at the very beginning of our inquiry; if we have not said much about the nature of social kinds, how could we say whether there are social kinds or not? I follow here Achille Varzi's (2011) 'priority' thesis, a meta-theoretical view according to which ontology, conceived as the theory of what there is, comes before metaphysics, conceived as the theory of what it is. The reason is that in order for metaphysical disagreement to take place we need to have ontological agreement: "[...] it is generally on the assumption that persons exist that monists and dualists, essentialists and conventionalists, or endurantists and perdurantists engage in ever more lively debates on what persons are and how they differ from other existents."²⁷ This point applies to social kinds too. All we need to do is to answer the semantic question, since we first need to clarify the meaning of the term 'social kind' and see what it refers to, but we need not elucidate the metaphysical nature of social kinds in order to claim whether there are social kinds or not. In fact, quite the opposite, as it is good practice to answer the ontological question before other metaphysical questions, otherwise we would embark on a metaphysics of something when we do not know whether it exists or not.

As I mentioned previously, I will argue that social kinds exist, and I will do that in more detail in the fourth chapter by showing why we should accept their existence. Arguing for the existence of social kinds is less controversial than it seems since, as we

²⁷ Varzi 2011, 408. I agree with Varzi's view that in many cases it is possible to do ontology without doing metaphysics, but not in all cases. Some entities, such as universals for example, need metaphysical characterization in order to be declared as existent or not. Moreover, Varzi's priority thesis seems to be a descriptive claim, whereas I believe it should be taken more as a normative claim. One should start by doing ontology, but that does not mean she cannot start by doing metaphysics, although it is inconvenient to do so.

shall see, most social ontologists are actually realists about social kinds, as long as we straighten out the meaning of the term ‘realism’ as the view that holds that there are indeed social kinds. What is really at stake in the debate over social kinds is their nature, not their existence.

The next fundamental question to ask if we want to give a fully-fledged metaphysics of social kinds is what I call the ‘constitutive question.’ This has to do with what social kinds are made of. Answering this question amounts to saying whether they are universals, sets, collections, etc. My constructivist account holds that social kinds are conceptual entities.

The final question I will address is what I call the ‘origin question’, and which concerns how social kinds come into existence. This is the main question that has been addressed in the literature about social kinds, and it could be seen as the inquiry into what Epstein calls the ‘anchoring’ of social categories.²⁸ Chapter 4 will answer the origin question by proposing what I call a ‘well-tempered pluralism’ concerning the origin of social kinds.

There are other issues I will address later concerning social kinds, as I shall give an account of social kinds as natural kinds and of the role values play in the making of social kinds. One might wonder why I did not add the relevant questions for these two problems, for instance, an epistemic question and a normative question. I agree that these are important issues to address, but they concern only certain types of social kinds, as not all social kinds are natural kinds, and not all social kinds are value-laden. The questions listed above must be asked if we want to provide a core philosophical account

²⁸ See Epstein 2015 and 2018. Note that the reference to anchoring is meant to delineate the scope of the inquiry, and it is not a commitment to his metaphysical view of it.

of social kinds, whereas the rest, although important and interesting, are additional to the constructivist account.

2.3 Defining ‘Social Kind’

Let me thus clarify what I mean by ‘kinds’ or ‘categories’ throughout my work. When I use these terms, I am referring to partitions of entities according to certain properties they share. Put together, social kinds are ‘partitions of entities that bear and share certain social properties’. What are the advantages of this definition? There are several.

First, as I explained, answering the semantic question should only fix the referent, and do no more than that. This definition does the job because it has a neutral effect on any further metaphysical characterization. Moreover, this definition allows one to distinguish between social kinds and social groups. Although they may look like the same thing and therefore be conflated with one another, social categories and social groups are not the same kind of entities. I roughly agree that social groups are people sharing a certain unifying element.²⁹ If we take a narrower view of social groups, this unifying element has to be some sort of shared intentionality, limiting social groups to organized groups, whereas if we take a broad view of social groups, this unifying element suffices to be a shared social property, such as that of being a Canadian citizen.³⁰ It may be that all the instances of a social kind are also the members of a corresponding social group. For example, if we believe that there is a social group constituted by every Canadian citizen, its members coincide with the instances of the social kind *Canadian*

²⁹ If you will, this is my answer to the semantic question about social groups, and it is not therefore meant to venture any further into the metaphysics of social groups.

³⁰ See Ritchie 2015, who considers both as kinds of social groups and calls them respectively “Groups of Type 1” and “Groups of Type 2”.

citizen. Still, there is a difference in the fact that social kinds are ways to group entities, whereas social groups are people themselves. This distinction in their nature also determines that their instances and members do not necessarily coincide. First, social categories are partitions of entities in general, not just people, so consequently not all of their instances form social groups (take for example the kinds *money* or *war*). Moreover, if one restricts social groups to people who share agency, then not all instances of social kinds that are people are members of social groups (take again as an example the kind *Canadian citizen*). It also seems that while the members of an existing social group are only such if they are currently members, this is not the case for instances of kinds, which may be past members of a certain group, in particular when it comes to organizations. For example, while members of the Congress are those currently holding office, the kind *congressperson* includes past members as well, so not all of its instances are members of the group.

Whether all members of a social group are also instances of a kind is a separate and tricky question that depends on how liberal is the notion of social category that we are employing here. Take some idiosyncratic social groups such as the Not Terribly Good Club of Great Britain, accepting as members people who demonstrated notable failures in their lives.³¹ Is there a corresponding social kind which is a *Not Terribly Good Club of Great Britain club member*? One might raise a concern that there are no such specific categories. Of course, members of the club are also instances of other, more general, social kinds, such as *club member* or *British citizen*, but these are not social kinds that specifically track the group. I am not opposed to the existence of social kinds being so

³¹ According to its president Stephen Pile, the club was shortly disbanded after its inception because it became too successful (Wikipedia 2020).

specific, but I do not think that there is necessarily a corresponding social kind for every social group. Since my claim is that social kinds are created, whether social kinds such as the *Not Terribly Good Club of Great Britain club member* exist depends on certain prevailing attitudes and not on the existence of the group itself.

Moreover, this definition allows us to distinguish between kinds and their instances. For example, *war* is a social kind, whereas the Peloponnesian War is an instance of the kind or, in other terms, a social object. I will say no more for now about this distinction, as I will explore it in the next chapter in which it plays a fundamental role in my argumentation in favor of constructivism.

CHAPTER 3

Against Natural Boundaries Realism

Traditionally, anti-realism about social kinds, the argument that our concepts directly construct social categories, has been the dominant view in social ontology. However, the perspective that some social kinds have natural, not merely conceptual, boundaries has recently challenged this dominant view. In this chapter, I argue against this perspective which I term ‘natural boundaries realism’ (NBR). First, I clarify that the realism at issue here is not ontological realism, according to which social kinds exist, as this is something natural boundaries realists and their rivals agree upon. I then give some arguments in favor of ontological realism, thereby answering the ontological question. After that, I hold that the main argument in favor of NBR confuses social kinds with social objects (e.g., some social kinds have natural boundaries because they would occur regardless of what we think of them). Finally, I argue that social kinds’ vague boundaries pose a dilemma for NBR because its defenders must accept this vagueness as either ontic or epistemic and both are problematic for different reasons.

3.1 Why Be an Ontological Realist about Social Kinds

Among the numerous polysemic words belonging to philosophical jargon, ‘realism’ [in]famously stands out as one of the trickiest. As Crispin Wright brilliantly puts it: “A philosopher who asserts that she is a realist about theoretical science, for example, or

ethics, has probably, for most philosophical audiences, accomplished little more than clear her throat.”³² Let us try to accomplish more than clearing our throat.

If you are ontologically realist about something, you are, in a sense, committed to the existence of that thing. This is, for example, how the term is employed when it comes to the debate on universals: a realist about universals believes in their existence. Clearly, being a realist about a certain entity does not entail being a realist about a different one. For instance, one can be a realist about mathematical objects, but not about people. The view denying the ontological realism of a certain entity is usually called ‘eliminativism’ or ‘nominalism.’³³

If we define ontological realism regarding social kinds this way, it turns out that there are no eliminativist views about social kinds, at least among contemporary authors. Some may reject the existence of specific social kinds: for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Naomi Zack argue that races do not exist because racialist biological essentialism is false.³⁴ But even in this case, rather than arguing that races do not exist at all, Appiah and Zack ought to be interpreted as arguing that there is no such thing as race when it is considered as a biological category, which does not rule out that races exist as social categories.³⁵

A reason to accept ontological realism with regards to social kinds resides in the important role they play in both ordinary and scientific life, an argument available to both natural boundaries realists and anti-realists. This is only a *prima facie* reason that

³² Wright 1992, 1.

³³ ‘Eliminativism’ tends to be used with regard to ordinary objects and the mind, whereas ‘nominalism’ tends to be used with regard to abstract objects.

³⁴ See Appiah (1995, 1996) and Zack (1993, 2002).

³⁵ Appiah himself later softened his eliminativism about race, admitting the social relevance of “human folk races” (Appiah 2006).

can be overridden by a less strong view of ontological commitments to the theories we have than the one implicit here. There is a stronger argument, however, available only to the constructivist. The idea is that if we assume that social kinds are constructed, then we have a good reason to claim that they exist, at least at a certain point in time. Why? Precisely because they have been constructed! Knowing that a house has been built is good evidence in favor of its, at least past, existence. As Ludger Jensen points out, it is a popular but fallacious line of reasoning, according to which, what is constructed is not real, whereas, on the contrary, construction guarantees existence at a certain point in time, “because the process of construction is a process of bringing into existence.”³⁶ Clearly, there is a whole lot of difference between buildings and social kinds, but what we are interested in is not the nature of the thing, but its existence.

Now, two objections can be raised at this point. Let us start with the one according to which it is false that we are committed to the existence of everything we create; by creating the characters of a novel, we do not thereby bring them into existence. There are two replies to be given to this point. First, there are respectable realist views about fictional entities, so it cannot be taken for granted that such things do not exist.³⁷ However, I am not here to argue for the existence of Anna Karenina or the Count of Monte Cristo, so let us grant that fictional entities do not exist. There is still something we are bringing into existence when we write novels, namely the conceptual representations of the characters that the readers form in their mind. So, constructing a character would involve creating the concept of the character. Someone who is a constructivist about social kinds may therefore be a realist too, and she may argue that

³⁶ Jansen 2017, p.259.

³⁷ See Kroon-Voltolini (2018) for a list of such realist views about fictional entities.

what we bring into existence when we create social kinds are some sorts of concepts. Now, of course, one must answer several questions in order to give a full picture of the nature of these concepts. What are they made of? How exactly are they constructed and how do they cease to exist? But following the distinction we drew in the last chapter, this is a metaphysical rather than an ontological problem, and all we are concerned with for now is the existence of these social kinds. We will get back to their metaphysics next.

Another objection is that, while social kinds exist, they do so in a peculiar way, given that there are different ways in which something may exist. There are social kinds, but in a different sense to which there are concrete ordinary objects, and in a way that impugns their reality: social kinds exist in a lesser way than other entities. Thus, it makes sense to be anti-realist, albeit in this weaker sense, about social kinds. This objection hinges on the meta-ontological principle that there are various meanings of ‘existence’, a view that has been called ‘multivocalism.’³⁸ Gilbert Ryle famously argues in favor of it by claiming that it would be ridiculous to say in the same sentence that “there exist prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinions and navies”.³⁹

On a closer look, Ryle’s objection is weaker than it seems. The fact that certain sentences asserting the existence of wildly different kinds of entities sound absurd does

³⁸ See White (1956), pp. 60-80. To be precise, White calls ‘duovocalism’ the view according to which there are exactly two senses of existence, whereas ‘multivocalism’ refers to the view that there are more than two senses of existence. The view does not imply *per se* that there are inferior and superior layers of reality, so it has to be matched with some hierarchy of ontological levels.

³⁹ “It is perfectly proper to say, in one logical tone of voice, that there exist minds and to say, in another logical tone of voice, that there exist bodies. But these expressions do not indicate two different species of existence, for ‘existence’ is not a generic word like ‘coloured’ or ‘sexed’. They indicate two different senses of ‘exist’, somewhat as ‘rising’ has different senses in ‘the tide is rising’, ‘hopes are rising’, and ‘the average age of death is rising’. A man would be thought to be making a poor joke who said that three things are now rising, namely the tide, hopes and the average age of death. It would be just as good or bad a joke to say that there exist prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinions and navies; or that there exist both minds and bodies.” (Ryle 1949, p.12)

not entail that they are also meaningless, but only that they are unusual within our linguistic conventions. As Peter van Inwagen points out, if we take Ryle's example that "there exist prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinions and navies", and we separately assert sentences like "there exist prime numbers" and "there exist public opinions", we also find that these expressions sound "silly to say", without them being present in the same sentence.⁴⁰ Moreover, if we hold dear the principle of parsimony, we have to claim that there are not different kinds of existence, when the difference can already be explained in terms of different natures.⁴¹

Now that we defended ontological realism, thereby answering the ontological question, we can move on to present Natural Boundaries Realism.

3.2 The Rise of NBR

Anti-realism, or constructivism, is the view according to which social categories are constructed by human concepts.⁴² Over the last century, this view about social kinds has been the dominant consensus in philosophy. Drawing on the works of Marx and Nietzsche, György Lukács developed his reification theory, according to which the capitalist system reifies society to make it look like it is a natural phenomenon. The

⁴⁰ van Inwagen (1998), p. 237.

⁴¹ "The vast difference between me and a table does not consist in our having vastly different sorts of being (Dasein, dass sein, "that it is"); it consists rather in our having vastly different sorts of nature (Wesen, was sein, "what it is"). If you prefer, what the table and I are like is vastly different. This is a perfectly trivial thing to say: that a vast difference between A and B must consist in a vast difference in their natures. But if a distinction can be made between a thing's being and its nature, then this trivial truth is in competition with a certain storable falsehood. And if one denies the trivial at the outset of one's investigations, one is bound to get into trouble down the road." (van Inwagen 1998, p. 15).

⁴² 'Constructivism' is a more popular way to call this family of views, but 'anti-realism' better stresses its contrast with natural boundaries realism: in any case, I will use the two terms interchangeably.

reason behind this is that by portraying social entities as natural parts of the world and not the product of human construction, people are more prone to accept them as inevitable and unchangeable. This view became a central tenet of the Critical Theory developed by, among others, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. One of Michel Foucault's philosophical tasks has also amounted to unearthing the artificial nature of the categories that define our life. Prominent examples of this line of research that had a profound intellectual impact are Foucault's *History of Madness in the Classical Age* (1972) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84), where he sets out to show how science gave naturalistic explanations of mental illness and sexual categories respectively, thereby hiding their social nature. It should be noted that these works are not intended to give a general theory of social categories, but rather take part in the 'debunking project,' as Sally Haslanger calls it, "in which constructionists argue that there is a theoretically important social kind or category that has not been adequately acknowledged, or not been adequately acknowledged to be social."⁴³

Searle's (1995, 2010) view is the most influential anti-realist account in the analytic tradition.⁴⁴ According to Searle, a metaphysical theory of the social world must contain three elements: collective intentionality, constitutive rules, and the assignment of

⁴³ Haslanger 2003, 322.

⁴⁴ Given his painstaking defense of realism, Searle would probably abhor the label 'anti-realist.' However, this term has a precise meaning here. Searle defends 'external realism,' which is a different view from the one we are concerned with: "Realism is the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations. Realism does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are" (Searle, 1995, 155). Therefore, this view is compatible with the claim that human intentionality creates a social reality, given that external realism is a very minimal ontological view about the world: "Alternative formulation: For the realist, it not only *could have* turned out that there are objects other than representations, but in fact *did* turn out that way. For the anti-realist it could not have turned out that there are representation-independent objects" (Searle 1995, 157).

functions. While collective intentionality is enough to have social facts such as going for a walk with someone, constitutive rules of the form 'X counts as Y in context C' are also required to have institutional facts such as Congress passing a law. The latter represents the subcategory of social facts that Searle was particularly interested in. Function assignment comes into play, because social entities bear the function or functions we assign to them. For Searle, functions are never intrinsic to the object but are always observer-related. They can be nonagentive, when they represent natural phenomena to which we assign a purpose (e.g., the heart's function to pump blood), or agentive, which depends on how we use the object (e.g., the function of a bathtub). The status function, for which the object has a function that cannot emerge merely by virtue of its physical nature, is a subcategory of agentive functions. This function makes institutional facts possible because in order to assign a function, we must collectively accept the constitutive rules of the form 'X counts as Y in context C.' For example, bills issued by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (X) count as money (Y) in the United States (context C).

Importantly, in Searle's philosophy both types (referred to here as 'kinds') and some tokens (referred to here as 'objects') are self-referential, meaning that they are what they are because they are taken to be what they are. Therefore, when people stop thinking about types in a certain way, these types and their tokens cease to have certain properties. For example, money is self-referential, because it stops functioning when people stop accepting its constitutive rule. Certain tokens that fall under a type are not self-referential because they are the way they are due to the type's constitutive rule. For example, a particular dollar bill that no one has ever seen or used would still be considered money. However, for other tokens, a collective acceptance of their type's

constitutive rules is not sufficient for them to be self-referential. For example, individual cocktail parties must be considered cocktail parties in order to be cocktail parties.

If we direct our attention more specifically to the topic of social categories, Hacking's (1995, 1999) work on the looping effect of human kinds and Haslanger's (2012) considerations on race and gender have been highly influential and combine an analytic approach with a Foucauldian type of inquiry and a focus on social justice issues respectively. The constructivist view has collected many supporters who have adapted it in a variety of ways.⁴⁵ Common to all these views is the idea that it is people who somehow create social kinds. However, in recent years social ontology has witnessed a new trend according to which many, if not all, social kinds are not seen as the product of our direct intentionality. This realist direction is somewhat revolutionary, as it breaks away from the prevailing constructivist view.⁴⁶

Writing two foundational papers in this area, Thomasson (2003a, 2003b) argues that while intentionality plays a role in the genesis of the social world, it does not always do so in the direct way that Searle described.⁴⁷ She highlights this reasoning by declaring that even if no one had ever directed their thoughts to economic recessions or racism,

⁴⁵ See Mallon (2016) and Ásta (2018) for alternatives to Searle. I focus here on the analytic philosophical tradition, but constructivism is the main view in continental philosophy, mainly drawing upon the works of Marx and Nietzsche. These views are not intended to provide a general theory of social categories. Instead, they tend to take part in the 'debunking project,' as Haslanger (2003, 322) calls it, "in which constructionists argue that there is a theoretically important social kind or category that has not been adequately acknowledged, or not been adequately acknowledged to be social."

⁴⁶ Durkheim (1896, 42) was a precursor to this realist turn: "By proceeding in this way from the outset the sociologist is immediately grounded firmly in reality. Indeed, how the facts are classified does not depend on him, or on his own particular cast of mind but on the nature of things."

⁴⁷ Friedman (2006, 82) raises a similar objection, claiming that Searle's theory does not address 'non-intentional systemic realities,' such as business cycles.

these social phenomena would have occurred anyway. As such, the existence of certain social kinds does not require a collective intentionality directed to them.⁴⁸

This account of social kinds has two significant consequences: one metaphysical and the other epistemological. From a metaphysical perspective, certain social kinds have ‘natural boundaries’ and are “not merely a division artificially imposed on the world by human concepts”.⁴⁹ This is why I find it appropriate to call this view ‘NBR.’ According to Thomasson, a kind has natural boundaries if and only if it satisfies both the ‘Ignorance Principle,’ according to which boundaries may not be known to anyone, and the ‘Error Principle,’ based on which any belief in those boundaries can be entirely wrong. For Thomasson, certain social kinds, such as *economic recession* and *racism*, satisfy both conditions.

From an epistemological perspective based on those two principles, the social sciences are capable of genuine discoveries about the world. If all social kinds and more generally, all social entities are self-referential, as Searle argues, they would be epistemically transparent. Only people outside a particular social group could make genuine discoveries (e.g., ethnographers discovering the norms of a particular society to which they do not belong). Therefore, unlike Searle, Thomasson can explain “the possibility of unknown social kinds awaiting discovery by the social sciences.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ “Some social kinds such as racism, superstition, etc., do depend on the existence of certain sets of beliefs and intentional behaviors, but may exist without the existence of any beliefs that are themselves about racism, superstition, etc.” (Thomasson 2003b, 606).

⁴⁹ Thomasson, 2003b, 582.

⁵⁰ Thomasson 2003a, 278. Guala (2010) argues that Thomasson misunderstood Searle’s view and other collective acceptance views of social kinds by implying ‘infallibilism,’ whereas Searle actually highlights that people can be wrong about the conditions defining a kind’s nature (e.g., something is considered money only if it is backed by gold). However, this notion seems at odds with what he writes in his paper expounding his realism about social kinds: “According to the so-called *difference thesis*, unlike natural kinds, some social kinds depend ontologically on our attitudes toward them. The difference thesis puts realism into question. It implies that these

This line of reasoning led Searle to admit that certain kinds of social facts do not require a direct collective recognition for existence, but he promptly dismissed the issue as one that his theory already covers: “Such facts are facts about systematic fallouts or consequences of ground-floor institutional facts”.⁵¹ Searle’s dismissal of the objection seems too hasty as it does not explain the nature of the relation between ground-floor facts and systematic fallouts. He ambiguously describes this relation as both causal, based on the previous quote, and constitutive: “The systematic fallouts are macro facts that are all constituted by the ground-floor or lower-level institutional facts”.⁵² Furthermore, this distinction between ground-floor facts and systematic fallouts does not theoretically contribute much to the picture, given that it mirrors Thomasson’s previous distinction between constructed and generated social facts and objects, respectively.⁵³

Other philosophers followed Thomasson’s lead. For instance, Khalidi (2015) offers a tripartition of social kinds based on whether and by how much their existence depends on our propositional attitudes. The distinctions are as follows: (1) not depending on our attitudes toward the kinds or their instances (e.g., *recession* and *racism*); (2) depending

kinds can only be invented, not discovered, and that we cannot be wrong about them” (Guala 2014, 57). Thus, Guala regards Searle as a champion of the difference thesis. We can make sense of Guala’s claim by considering certain interpretations of collective acceptance as not implying infallibilism, such as Searle’s, and others, such as Thomasson’s, as implying fallibilism. At any rate, just as for Thomasson, it is important for the sake of Guala’s account to show that social kinds are discoverable and that the social sciences do indeed discover them.

⁵¹ Searle 2010, 22–23. Here I am using Searle’s terminology of ‘facts.’ However, his related ontology is rather messy, as his ‘social facts’ refer to both what the philosophical tradition considers facts, as well as social objects and social kinds.

⁵² Searle, 2010, 22.

⁵³ “Certain sorts of social facts and objects are intentionally created (these I will refer to as ‘constructed,’ since this implies an intention in creating them); others are the unintended byproducts of collective intentions and/or intentionally created social constructions (these I will refer to as ‘generated’)” (Thomasson 2003a, 278).

solely on our attitudes toward the kinds, but not necessarily toward their instances (e.g., *money* and *war*), and (3) depending on our attitudes toward both the kinds and their instances (e.g., *permanent resident* and *Prime Minister*). Khalidi explicitly borrows the *recession* and *racism* examples from Thomasson, thus granting an important status to this first type and claiming that both the first and second social kinds can be natural kinds because they are associated with causal properties.⁵⁴ It permits them to appear in causal laws and generalizations, allowing for reliable scientific induction. The third social kind differs from the first two because its properties are linked by convention rather than causality, which "implies that these kinds are invented rather than discovered".⁵⁵ Thus, Khalidi's work also underlines the importance of scientific discoverability.⁵⁶

In his realist account, Guala (2014) defends a broader version of NBR, arguing that no social kind constitutively depends on our propositional attitude toward it. This does not mean that intentionality is excluded from the social phenomena that constitute social kinds, but that "dependence on collective propositional attitudes directed toward the kind itself is neither necessary nor sufficient for an institutional kind to exist".⁵⁷ Following Searle, Guala uses the expression 'institutional kinds' to purportedly refer to

⁵⁴ Note that having natural boundaries, while being a necessary condition for Khalidi, it is not a sufficient condition for a kind to be natural, as it also needs to feature in causal laws and generalizations and be capable of granting reliable scientific induction. We will see that in more details in chapter 5.

⁵⁵ Khalidi 2015, 156.

⁵⁶ Given Khalidi's framework, I believe a kind's discoverability only represents a property of the first instance, not the second one, because in this case the discoverability which follows the Ignorance Principle and the Error Principle only concerns the kind's instantiation. "At least for some social kinds of the conventional or institutional variety, even if all social actors agree that something counts as a token of social kind *K* that does not guarantee that it is indeed a member of kind *K*. Moreover, even if no one regards something as a token of social kind *K*, it may well be a member of kind *K*" (Khalidi 2015, 101–102).

⁵⁷ Guala 2014, 59.

directly attitude-dependent kinds such as *government bond owner*. He had already assumed, following Thomasson and Khalidi's works, that certain kinds, such as *inflation* and *unemployment*, do not depend on our attitudes toward them. Thus, Guala's thesis applies to any social kind, not solely institutional ones.

Resorting to the classic Searlean example of money, Guala shows how collectively accepting that something is money is neither necessary nor sufficient for the existence of *money*. Its necessary conditions are different, involving people believing that others are willing to use paper bills in the future and the state backing this belief by accepting tax payments through paper bills issued by the central bank. None of these conditions require people to adopt a propositional stance toward the kind itself. In the same vein as Thomasson and Khalidi, Guala notes that people ignoring or being wrong about the instantiation conditions would not affect the kind's existence and that "the characteristic properties of institutional kinds ought to be discovered, just as in the natural realm".⁵⁸

Moreover, Searle's condition is also insufficient because what constitutes *money* is a set of actions and expectations for which the only relevant attitudes are those related to other people's attitudes, not to the kind itself.⁵⁹ Thus, if people do not behave in the relevant ways that Guala describes, their collective holding of the right beliefs about the

⁵⁸ Guala 2014, 67.

⁵⁹ Guala assumes that Searle takes his condition to be sufficient as well. However, as Khalidi notes, it is not clear whether this is the case when it comes to both the token and the type: "Even though Searle sometimes writes as though all there is to something being money is for it to be thought of as such, he also indicates that he thinks of this as a necessary not a sufficient condition. For example, Searle (2006, 14) states: '[...] a necessary condition of its being money is that people have to intend it to be, and think it is money.' But as we shall see, it is a rather strong necessary condition, in the sense that he thinks it is nearly sufficient (in this and many similar cases)" (Khalidi 2015, 98).

kind's instantiation conditions would not be sufficient to form the kind. While collectively setting up conditions for a kind may play a role in helping coordinate the actions of social actors, it is still not what constitutes the social kind.⁶⁰

3.3 A Missed Distinction: Kinds and Objects

The realist approach is based on the following observation: many, if not all, social kinds are what they are, regardless of what we think of them. In other words, certain categories, such as *economic recession* or *racism*, exist and bear properties regardless of our attitudes toward them. For Guala, even social kinds thought to be paradigmatic examples of constructedness, such as *money*, are what they are regardless of our attitudes toward them. This perspective does not mean that our beliefs about social kinds are inert when it comes to changing their instances. When we are equipped with the appropriate knowledge about kinds, governments and citizens can proceed to change society by altering our appropriate actions and behaviors (e.g., knowing what an economic recession looks like can enable us to help avert or prevent it). These beliefs about the kinds can help us change instances, but our collective intentionality would still not constitute the kinds.

Although I find merit in NBR in that it sheds light on the limits of overly intellectual theories of the social world, I would say that the main argument for NBR

⁶⁰ “Conventions do play a role, but only in the choice of the devices that coordinate actions and beliefs. The choice of these devices may be arbitrary, within certain limits, but it is not essential for the constitution of institutional kinds. The truly important properties – those that turn a token piece of paper into money, for example – are not conventional at all: they involve facts like people’s beliefs about the likelihood that others will accept paper bills in exchange for goods and services. These beliefs in turn depend on hard facts like the number of bills circulating in the economy or mechanisms and dispositions like the enforcement power of the state” (Guala, 2014, 67).

fails insofar as it falls victim to conflating entities with the kinds to which they belong. There is a difference between the objects in the world and the way these objects are grouped together.⁶¹ This difference does not hinge on any particular metaphysical characterization of kindhood, but on the minimal account of what kinds actually are, namely, partitions of entities that bear and share certain properties. This division may be natural, as the realists claim, or artificial, as the anti-realists claim, but it remains a division of entities according to the certain features that characterize them. Thus, there is an important distinction between kinds and their instances.

To clarify this distinction, we can consider a frequently quoted example in the literature of natural kinds; that of the *tiger*. There is a difference between *tiger* the category, on the one hand, and tiger the animal, on the other hand. *Tiger* groups all entities that bear and share the properties of being an apex predator and having dark vertical stripes, whereas tiger is the particular animal that is an apex predator and has dark vertical stripes. The problem with NBR is that what natural boundaries realists call ‘social kinds’ are not partitions of entities, but the entities themselves belonging to the kinds. For instance, Thomasson writes that

a given economic state can be a recession even if no one thinks of it, and even if no one regards anything as a recession or any conditions as sufficient for counting as a recession [...] something or someone can be racist without anyone regarding anything as racist – racism clearly existed long before anyone took any activity or pattern of behavior to be racist.

⁶¹ ‘Entity’ and ‘object’ are here used in the most general way, as they refer to anything of which something can be predicated. In this sense, as kinds are entities or objects too, they can be partitions of other kinds.

We have seen that Khalidi uses the same examples in his work. Specifically, these authors perceive economic recessions as states of affairs or perhaps events, and something that is racist as either an action or a person. These are all entities, but not partitions thereof. Guala's argument rests on the same metaphysical flaw, because the way he describes what characterizes money shows that he is referring to social objects, not kinds: "The kind money ultimately is nothing but the set of actions, and the related set of expectations".⁶² As in the case of Thomasson and Khalidi, Guala refers to what constitutes the entity money, rather than *money*, as the kind itself. There are passages where both Thomasson and Guala seem to recognize this distinction,⁶³ but they do not actually embrace it. Thus, what natural boundaries realists successfully show is that some social objects are not constructed. However, this result is not enough to declare that the social kinds under which they are categorized have natural boundaries.

⁶² Guala 2014, 66.

⁶³ "Some may be tempted to the view that, as social phenomena, such things don't really exist until we have the concepts for them. But the point here is precisely that, while some social concepts (such as money) require intentional states involving that concept in order for things of that kind to exist, others (such as recessions) do not. The idea that recessions and racism do not exist until we have concepts for them, on reflection, has no more plausibility than the idea that electrons did not exist until we developed the concept for them. Something falling under the concept of "electron" could (and did) exist long before scientists discovered them, and beliefs and practices that fall under the concept of racism could (and did) exist long before the concept or word was known" (Thomasson 2003a, 276–277). See also Thomasson (2003a, 288), where she discusses how economists stipulate the conditions for what counts as a recession. In addition, Guala writes that he argued elsewhere (Guala and Hindriks, 2013) that that "general terms like 'money', 'private property', 'professor' etc., simply summarize bundles of actions or strategies that are associated with each term [...] But when the actions are numerous and complex, it is useful to cluster and subsume under the umbrella of a single theoretical term: a new concept (money, private property, professorship) is introduced for economy of thought" (Guala 2013, 65).

At this point, a realist may defend their view by stating that the kinds exist, because the instances exist. Thus, if you are ontologically committed to entities, such as economic recessions, racist behavior, and money, you have succeeded in identifying them as instances, from which you conclude that the *economic recession*, *racism*, and *money* kinds exist. However, this is begging the question. When a realist claims that instances exist, it already implies that kinds exist, because the existence of a kind's instance necessarily implies the existence of the kind in question.⁶⁴ However, what the realist can actually prove is, at most, the existence of some entities, but not of some instances or some kinds, as a result. The following example will help us to understand this crucial point.

First, let us consider some scattered objects: a desk, the chair underneath it, and the lamp on top of it. This scattered object has some properties as do other ordinary objects, such as occupying a certain region of spacetime, and we can show that there is such a thing in the world. However, its existence arguably does not imply the existence of a kind with natural boundaries *per se*. We can argue that there is a concept by which we can group other scattered objects: having a desk, a chair underneath, and a lamp resting on it as parts, but that would not be a kind in the particular sense that the realist wants, namely one with natural boundaries not imposed by human concepts. Thus, the following question remains: even if no one thought of the desk, chair, or lamp, this scattered object would still exist, but would the kind *desk-chair-lamp* exist too? It seems counter-intuitive to say that the boundaries of this kind are dictated by nature and not by human concepts. If the realist bites the bullet and says that the *desk-chair-lamp* is

⁶⁴ I do not think that the reverse is true: you may have a kind without instances, and constructivism allows for that (e.g., a legal status that no one ever happens to have).

also a kind with natural boundaries, then it would follow that there are relevant kinds with natural boundaries for any object due to the lack of theoretical specificity, which would make the notion of kinds with natural boundaries too broad for the realist.

One might object that I am assuming the existence of things such as scattered objects, which is something we cannot take for granted.⁶⁵ I agree with this view, but two problems nonetheless arise for the realists. First, they need to provide an account of how certain scattered objects are legitimate entities, because many social objects are, at least *prima facie*, scattered (e.g., social groups are, at the very minimum, made up of people).⁶⁶ In other words, the realists must provide a theory of what gives unity to some spatially scattered objects and not others. Second, even if they manage to do so, they will need to explain how one can infer the existence of a kind with natural boundaries from the mere existence of an entity. For example, if we break a desk into several smaller pieces, then keep one of the pieces and destroy the others,⁶⁷ this entity would have many properties, regardless of what we think of them, such as volume, mass, weight, melting point, etc. However, we would not say that this object belongs to the kind *broken desk, fragment of a desk, or piece of a desk*, or at least not that these are kinds with natural boundaries. However, we may ask: why not? What are the properties that make something belong to a kind with natural boundaries instead of conceptual boundaries?

⁶⁵ See Cartwright (1975) and Biro (2017) for two different viewpoints on the matter.

⁶⁶ I say, “at the very minimum,” because previous arguments have noted how theories of social groups involving only people are defective (Epstein, 2015).

⁶⁷ I must break the desk to ensure that it ceases to have its function and I must destroy the other parts to ensure it is not a scattered object. It must cease to have its function, because some argue that artifact kinds have natural boundaries: “The essential properties which characterize (many) kinds of artifacts hang together in just as mind-independent a way as do the essential properties that characterize members of familiar natural kinds—from argon atoms and H₂O molecules to glaciers and geodes” (Elder, 2007, 33–34). As we will see shortly, the solution of considering a kind as having natural boundaries, because it has properties that are grouped together, still runs into problems for different reasons.

At this point, the realist might argue that there is a type of kind that has natural boundaries if, and only if, that kind has properties of instances that tend to appear together when the kind is instantiated. However, this solution is questionable in two respects. First, in this case the notion of having natural boundaries would collapse into that of being a natural kind, even though the two are different.⁶⁸ The consensus is that natural kinds allow explanations and inductive inferences, but this consensus does not go further than that. Remember the distinction that we drew in the second chapter. In this context it is helpful to resort to Magnus' (2014) distinction between the taxonomy question, concerning the difference between natural kinds and other kinds, and the ontology question, regarding how a particular kind constitutes a unity. Additionally, we have seen how Williams (2018) considers another way to understand these questions: the taxonomy question asks what natural kinds are, while the ontology question asks what natural kinds consist of. In answering the taxonomy question, we usually claim that natural kinds serve some explanatory and inductive purposes, whereas in answering the ontology question, we can assume that natural kinds have essences or are homeostatic clusters of properties. Thus, the question of whether natural kinds have natural boundaries relates to answering the ontology question.

Second, even if certain kinds' properties of instances are more cohesive than those of others, in many cases it is still up to us to draw the contours of those categories. Taking economic recessions as an example, we can agree that they happen regardless of what we think of them, but what is an economic recession anyway? Realists claim that it has natural boundaries, but what are they? I believe we can agree that it is helpful to

⁶⁸ Khalidi argues that even kinds whose existence depends on our attitudes toward them, such as *money* and *war*, can be natural kinds, although human concepts determine their boundaries, but not their instances.

look at economics scholars' definitions to understand recessions, but this will show how economists, not nature, set the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a recession.

A review of the literature shows that there are two main ways to define recessions. The first is exemplified in the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), which officially declares when an economic recession has taken place or is taking place in the United States. The NBER defines it as a “decline in economic activity that lasts more than a few months”) or alternatively as “a significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production, and wholesale-retail sales.”⁶⁹ Although very influential, this definition has been criticized, as it does not allow for prompt policy decisions and ignores growth recessions, namely positive but below-average periods of growth.⁷⁰ The second defines it as a “period (lasting at least two quarters) in which aggregate economic output falls”.⁷¹ As Abberger and Nierhaus (2008) show, this way of characterizing economic recessions became popular following Shiskin's (1974) article published in *The New York Times*, and it remains widely adopted, although rejected by the NBER (2021a).

Interestingly, Shiskin's definition of it is much more precise. However, in the article he writes that many people define it in terms of a two-quarter decline in real GDP and that “while this definition is simplistic, it has worked quite well in the past.”⁷² What

⁶⁹ Respectively NBER 2021b and 2008.

⁷⁰ Knoop 2015.

⁷¹ Acemoglu, Laibson, and List 2021, 120.

⁷² Shiskin's specific definition is as follows: “In terms of duration—declines in real G.N.P. for 2 consecutive quarters; a decline in industrial production over a six-month period. In terms of depth—A 1.5 per cent decline in real G.N.P.; a 15 per cent decline nonagricultural employment;

is interesting about this statement is that Shiskin implies the possibility of multiple *economic recession* definitions that work quite well even if they are vague. Does this mean that there are multiple natural boundaries to *economic recession*? Or could it imply that we have not yet found the actual natural boundaries of *economic recession*? I will delve into these two possible implications in more detail when I discuss vagueness in the following section. Ultimately, the point I want to make is that the evidence that emerges from the actual definitions of the *economic recession* kind suggests, at least *prima facie*, that its boundaries are drawn by experts, not by nature.

It is also important to note that this ontological dependence of kinds on instances results in kinds that emerge in and out of existence. The social kind *economic recession* would exist only when a recession occurs, and it would cease to exist once we reached times of economic prosperity. This problem arises not only in the social sciences but also in the sciences that deal with things that no longer exist (e.g., the kind *dinosaur*). I do not mean to argue that there is no way around this problem, but that a solution must be found in this regard.⁷³ Thus far, my objection only shows that the realist argument fails and not that NBR is false, because there might be other reasons why it is true. Thus, in the following section, I provide an argument for why NBR is indeed false.

a two-point rise in unemployment to a level of at least 6 per cent. In terms of diffusion—A decline in nonagricultural employment in more than 75 per cent of industries, as measured over six-month spans, for 6 months or longer” (Shiskin, 1974).

⁷³ For example, one may stipulate that a kind with natural boundaries comes into existence when there are instances and subsequently does not depend on them anymore (a solution that is, however, quite *ad hoc*). Alternatively, one may try to argue for a form of platonic realism regarding social kinds, according to which social kinds with natural boundaries exist independently of their instantiations.

3.4 Vague Boundaries, Distinct Problems

To begin my argument, I will assume that social kinds have natural boundaries that are not conceptually fixed. Now, if we consider the social kinds we have listed thus far (realist examples of kinds with natural boundaries: *economic recession*, *racism*, and *money*), all of them are characterized by vague boundaries as there is no sharp demarcation between what is and what is not an instance of these kinds. While there are some clear cases of economic recession, racism, and money, others are borderline cases. A glance at the news suffices to find plenty of examples of how these kinds have vague boundaries, such as debates about whether the current decline in economic activity should be regarded as a recession,⁷⁴ whether cryptocurrency is money,⁷⁵ or whether certain symbols are racist.⁷⁶ It should come as no surprise that this fact holds for many other social kinds as well.

However, why should the pervasiveness of vagueness be an issue for the realist? In this regard, we can divide the theories of vagueness into three main categories: (1) ontic (besides our concepts, other vague objects with fuzzy boundaries exist); (2) epistemic (the source of vagueness is not the world itself, but our ignorance of it), and (3) representational (vagueness is neither rooted in reality nor in our ignorance, but a feature of our representational systems).⁷⁷ The natural boundaries realist cannot claim that the vagueness of social kinds is a matter of semantic incompleteness, for that would mean agreeing with constructivist claims that our concepts set boundaries. Thus, the

⁷⁴ Cranston 2020.

⁷⁵ Smialek 2021.

⁷⁶ Stiem 2018.

⁷⁷ I subsume linguistic theories of vagueness under the more general umbrella of representational theories of vagueness.

realist faces the dilemma of having to accept vagueness in ontic or epistemic terms. I contend that both alternatives put the realist in real trouble.

The problem with accepting ontic vagueness is that it is both controversial, as the prevailing view on the matter is that there are no objects of this kind,⁷⁸ and counterintuitive, because it implies that we live in a world in which objects with vague boundaries, such as deserts, forests, and mountains, consist of some parts that are precise and others that are vague. This claim is not only counterintuitive but also hardly comprehensible.⁷⁹ There have been several attempts over the past decades to give this view more plausibility, and the fact that this claim is both controversial and counterintuitive is not enough to dismiss it. However, the aim here is not to argue for the lack of ontic vagueness. Rather, considering vagueness as ontological places an additional metaphysical burden on the realist, one that anti-realists do not have to bear because they can explain the vagueness through the concepts forming the boundaries. Without having to choose a particular view of vagueness, the constructivist can count on the truth of the platitude that our conceptual apparatus is vague. Furthermore, if the realist claims that vagueness must be conceived in epistemic terms, it will mean that we only find vague social kinds, because of our epistemic deficiencies. Specifically, if we had the proper knowledge about a certain social kind, we would find that it has precise boundaries. In this way, the realist need not fear entering the metaphysical minefield of ontic vagueness. However, there are still two issues with this approach. First, it is

⁷⁸ This has been the received view, at least since Russell (1923).

⁷⁹ “[...] to me the claim that the vagueness of ‘Everest’ lies entirely in the vagueness of Everest is unintelligible. For just what would this vague object be? How could we be so precise as to designate it? At what distance from the summit would its parts begin to fade away? To me these are questions that cannot be properly answered and the claim that mountains, deserts, and the like are vague objects is only meaningful as a *façon de parler*” (Varzi, 2001, 52).

somewhat strange to imagine a social world that can be neatly divided into such precise categories. For example, it would be a world in which there is a precise number of days and perhaps even hours or minutes of falling national GDP that could neatly establish a given event as an economic recession, while another event that only lasts an hour or less is not. Second, even if we accept that there are social kinds with discrete boundaries, the realist must pay a high epistemological price. If the social kinds we deal with in the social sciences have vague boundaries, it means that the real social kinds, the ones with natural boundaries, are still to be discovered. However, one of the driving motivations of the realist view has been to explain exactly how the social sciences investigate and discover real social kinds. Thus, an epistemic view of vagueness would run directly counter to this rationale for NBR.⁸⁰ Anti-realists do not have the same problem. Given their belief that the boundaries are imposed by human concepts, they may commit to a conceptual view of vagueness according to which it is explained in the relationship between our representational apparatus and the represented entities.⁸¹

One might object that vagueness is a phenomenon that is not unique to the social world, as the problems I have outlined also apply to a natural boundaries realist who is, for example, concerned with biology, for which the boundaries of relevant kinds may be vague. It has long been known that the boundaries between species are not precise, given the gradualness and duration of the speciation process.⁸² I agree, but I do not think it is

⁸⁰ Interestingly, the only social kinds with no vague boundaries may be found in the legal domain (e.g., fiat boundaries that can be drawn precisely). For example, a legal system may draw precise, necessary, and sufficient conditions for someone to be a citizen. This is not always or often the case in law, but precisely because of their conventional nature, legal kinds can have precise boundaries (without being natural).

⁸¹ There are many theories in this regard. I am not committed to any theory in particular, but I highlight how this view must be broad enough to engage with the language, as vagueness is not only a linguistic phenomenon, and must be more generally representational.

⁸² Hull 1965.

an objection to my view. I do believe that anti-realism applies to other kinds that are the focus of other scientific efforts, but this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper as my focus is specifically on social kinds. Therefore, the question of whether and where we can find kinds with natural boundaries is not a problem that I need to address here for the purpose of criticizing NBR.

Overall, vagueness is indeed a dilemma for the realists. Either they accept ontic vagueness, which comes at a metaphysical cost, or they admit that the social sciences do not study kinds, which comes at an epistemological cost. The anti-realist account does not face this dilemma because it holds that the boundaries of social kinds are drawn by humans and can capture this vagueness in representational terms. The fact that humans devise social kinds does not mean that any such conditions apply across the board, as empirical considerations on how we can best represent the social world remain significant, making certain categories better tools than others.⁸³ For example, defining an economic recession as a state of the economy in which the national GDP falls for only a few weeks would be neither explanatory nor inductively meaningful. Moreover, normative considerations may also play a role in making one category more appropriate than another. For instance, one criticism of the NBER's definition of economic recession was related to its policy implications.⁸⁴ In other words, the social world does not come

⁸³ This does not mean that social kinds are always representations of something 'out there.' I have mostly been concerned with the social kinds that aim to represent things that already exist in the world, but there is always the possibility of inventing new social kinds (e.g., some types of legal kinds).

⁸⁴ "One problem with this definition is that a lag exists between getting data and making decisions. Output must be falling for at least 'a few months' before the NBER will declare a recession. In practice, the economy has typically been in a recession for at least six months before it has been officially recognized as one by the NBER. For example, the recession that began in the United States in December 2007 was actually not recognized as such by the NBER until December 2008, a full year after it began. This recognition lag might delay a policy response until it is too late to be effective" (Knoop 2015, 14).

prepackaged with categories, rather it is such that we can establish some ways of organizing it that are better than others.

In conclusion, social kinds are not what natural boundaries realists claim them to be. Specifically, the argument for NBR fails, because it confuses social kinds with social objects and the vagueness that characterizes these kinds gives rise to a difficult dilemma. Given the issues of NBR and noting how constructivism does not run into the same vagueness problems, this view lends credence to anti-realism. However, rejecting NBR only represents the beginning of an anti-realist account of social kinds, for the constitutive and origin questions are still to be answered.

CHAPTER 4

Getting Real About Anti-realism

Now that I have rejected NBR, it is time to move on and give some more metaphysical flesh to constructivism by laying out the core of my anti-realist account. I tackle the constitutive question arguing that we ought to accept social kinds as concepts. I move on to answer the origin question, arguing for what I call a ‘well-tempered pluralism’ regarding the creation of social kinds. In the end, I defend anti-realism from recent attacks that have been raised against it.

4.1 Social Kinds as Concepts

It is time to tackle the constitutive question: what are social kinds made of? Refuting NBR implies that social kinds are not to be found ‘out there’, independent of ourselves, and that they are instead constructed entities. But what more could be said about the nature of these constructed entities? One could resort to universals, and that certainly comes in handy in metaphysics. Despite the massive literature on the topic, there is no agreed and precise definition of ‘universal’, but it is reasonable to say that universals are properties that can be instantiated in multiple entities. And just as properties are universals, one might claim that social kinds, which are associated with properties, are universals.⁸⁵ The problem with this is that the nature of universals is hardly compatible with the constructed nature of the kinds. If one endorses the Platonic view of universals, one needs to explain how we can construct abstract entities. It is true that there are views that account for the construction of abstract artifacts, but these are theories

⁸⁵ See Khalidi 2013, pp. 8-9 for a discussion of this type of solution with regard to natural kinds.

concerning the creation of fictional characters and that, unlike Platonic universals, depend on entities that are in space and time.⁸⁶ Even if we are Aristotelian about universals, and so take them to be concrete entities, it is still not obvious how humans are able to create objects that have multiple locations in each of their instantiations. It has been noted that we could take kinds to not be universals, but clusters of universals.⁸⁷ I believe that this still does not overcome the problem, as some social kinds are associated with purely arbitrary properties (see legal kinds), which can hardly be accommodated as universals.

An alternative solution could be to get rid of the need for a metaphysical characterization of social kinds. The idea is that there are classifications of entities that share social properties, but this does not mean that entities corresponding to these kinds exist. This view is similar to ‘weak realism’ with regard to natural kinds, according to which the existence of natural classifications does not commit us to the existence of the corresponding entities, whether these are universals or not.⁸⁸ However, it is hard for me to wrap my mind around this kind of solution as there is an inconsistency in stating that there is a classification and yet there is not.

I suggest, instead, that social kinds are concepts. It is striking to me that in the recent literature on social kinds this answer has not been fully explored, as other constructivist views mainly discuss the making of social reality itself, and the role that intentionality plays in particular, rather than what exactly social reality is made of.⁸⁹ It

⁸⁶ See for example Thomasson 1999 and Sainsbury 2009.

⁸⁷ “[...] It is not clear that we require an independent and irreducible category of universals to accommodate the kinds” (Armstrong 1997, p. 67).

⁸⁸ See Bird and Tobin 2022.

⁸⁹ See of course Searle 1995 and 2010, but also Bratman 1987, Gilbert 1989, Tuomela 2002, and Ásta 2018 for views that take intentionality to be central.

focuses more on the origin question than the constitutive question. Why is that? A possible explanation for why concepts are snubbed in the literature of social kinds is the lack of a clear and compelling metaphysics of concepts. Moreover, it has been noted how resorting to concepts is often confusing, as they are often mistaken as either the entities they represent or for the names that they have.⁹⁰

However, if we are being careful, this misleading use is avoidable, as concepts are metaphysically respectable entities. It is true that there is no agreed metaphysics of concepts (although when does that ever happen?). Some views hold that concepts are mental representations, and others that they are mental dispositions.⁹¹ However, we need not commit ourselves to any particular metaphysics of concepts, as long as we agree that concepts are the building blocks of our ability to reason and that they are the products of our minds.

What are the advantages of considering social kinds as concepts? I believe that there are several. First, they accommodate the big anti-realist picture in the way I defined it, as opposed to NBR. Concepts are mental entities that are the outcomes of human cognition and, as such, they are constructed entities. Compared with universals, they are better candidates for being constructed entities. As we will see in the next chapter, there is more than one way in which social kinds are created.

Second, concepts do not face the same vagueness dilemma that NBR faces. It is widely accepted that concepts can be vague, but their vagueness is a representational one, which, unlike the ontic and the epistemic vagueness, does not present any issue for social kinds. The anti-realist account does not face the NBR dilemma, because it holds

⁹⁰ See Smith 2004 on this point.

⁹¹ See Margolis and Laurence 2019 for a review of views about the nature of concepts.

that the boundaries of concepts are drawn by humans and can capture this vagueness in representational terms. Note that the fact that humans devise social kinds does not mean that any such conditions apply across the board, as empirical considerations on how we can best represent the social world remain significant, making certain categories better tools than others.⁹² For example, defining an economic recession as a state of the economy in which the national GDP falls for only a few weeks, would be neither explanatory nor inductively meaningful. Moreover, as we will see in the last chapter, normative considerations may also play a role in making one category more appropriate than another. For instance, one criticism of the NBER's definition of economic recession is related to its policy implications.

The social world does not come prepackaged with categories. Rather, it is such that we can establish some ways of organizing it that are better than others. Of course, it does not follow that all social things are constructed. As natural boundaries realists show, this is not the case with things like economic recessions and acts of racism. As we have seen, these are things that exist independently of our acknowledgment of their existence and nature. Still, there are multiple ways in which we can carve out social reality; ways that do not directly impinge upon the objectivity of social reality. This is one of those cases where I have to tread carefully on the tightrope I mentioned in the introduction; the one dividing what is inside our head from what is outside of it. With this regard, I think David Wiggins' view, which he calls 'conceptual realism,' comes to our aid:

⁹² This does not mean that social kinds are always representations of something 'out there.' I have mostly been concerned with the social kinds that aim to represent things that already exist in the world, but there is always the possibility of inventing new social kinds (e.g., some legal kinds). More on that later.

“The object is what it is, whether or not it is singled out. But the object does not single itself out. Nor need the simple commitment to engage with nature and that which is there independently of us require *us* to single it out. What thing-kind conceptions we have or deploy is not determined under this kind of compulsion. Nature does not reach down and lodge them in a pigeon hole or letter box for us. But nor yet is the matter determined quite arbitrarily. Rather, our store of thing-kind conceptions comes into being under the influence of our experience, our constitution, our ways of dwelling in the world and in reciprocity with our active concerns, practical and intellectual alike.”

David Wiggins 2001, pp. 159-160

Concepts can be mapped onto the world without the world being changed by this act. Note that this is true even for what Hacking says about interactive kinds, such as *child abuse* and *multiple personality*, which have a ‘looping effect’: “Classification of people and their actions affects the people and their actions, which in turn affects our knowledge about them and classification of them. Interactive kinds are those kinds that change because the people falling under them change their behavior because of that.”⁹³ Even in this case it is not the categorization itself that changes reality, but the ‘feedback effect’ that has been produced by the causal process that the categorization helped start.

Finally, a constructivist account with concepts is much more flexible, as it allows social categories to be wrongly associated with certain properties, such as in the case of *witch*. I have been highlighting so far how concepts can track down reality, but it is also true that created social kinds sometimes miserably fail at doing that, and an all-around

⁹³ Hacking 1988, p.55.

view of social kinds should account for that too. I will now defend this account from recent attacks that it has faced.

4.2 Defending Anti-realism

Rebecca Mason has recently argued that anti-realism about social kinds, defined as the view according to which social kinds are not real because they are mind dependent, is false because it fails to show how social kinds depend on mental states and how this dependence impugns the reality of the kinds. In her paper, Mason shows how certain ways to set up the dependence conditions are problematic, as they involve a modal element that does not capture the intuitive dependence of the kinds on the mind.⁹⁴ According to Mason, the way that some philosophers such as Searle and Thomasson (remembering that Thomasson does believe that some social kinds do not have natural boundaries) construe the dependence relation is as follows: “A kind, *K*, is mind-dependent =df We determine which properties are essential to being *K*.”⁹⁵ She then argues that this definition cannot accomplish the task of showing the dependence relation, because if we suppose that a kind *K* is essentially *F*, where *F* is a set of properties, “[...] then any kind that is not *F* is not *K*. It follows that *K* is necessarily *F*. If *K* is necessarily *F*, then we have no control over whether *K* is *F*, for we have no control over which properties *K* has necessarily”.⁹⁶

While she does not talk about concepts, she does discuss mind-dependence and, since concepts are obviously mind-dependent, it concerns our view here. I find a number of issues with Mason’s view. First, cashing out the dependence relation between minds

⁹⁴ In Mason 2021, she gives her own view of how this relation works for her.

⁹⁵ Mason 2020, p.60.

⁹⁶ Mason 2020, p.60.

and social kinds is not a problem peculiar to the anti-realist. Philosophers argue about whether we should analyze ontological dependence in terms of modality, essence, or as a primitive notion, and while the modal view has been shown to have issues, there is no consensus about how to understand this relation.⁹⁷ Second, if constructivists take social kinds to be conceptual entities, and where conceptual entities are mental entities, they do not need to state that there is a mind-dependence relation; social kinds are just human concepts, and so there is no point in arguing about in what sense they are mind-dependent or not. Saying that emotions and thoughts are mind-dependent is trivial, as it is to say that social kinds are mind-dependent when you consider them to be conceptual entities. Thirdly, constructivists are not bound to consider the properties associated with the kinds as essential to the kinds. As we will see in more detail in chapter 5, there are several accounts of natural kinds that are rivals to essentialism, such as the homeostatic property cluster theory, Craver's 'simple causal' theory, and the stable property cluster theory; none of them posit that the properties are essential to natural kinds and, by consequence, to kinds more generally.⁹⁸ Now, Mason says that she has a minimal account of essential properties according to which they are "just those properties that identify the kind in question."⁹⁹ However, if these were the case then Mason should drop the claim that a kind *K* is necessarily *F*, because the identifying properties are not *per se* necessary properties. A central claim of essentialism regarding (natural) kinds is precisely that they are associated with the same properties in every

⁹⁷ See Takho and Lowe 2020.

⁹⁸ See Boyd 1988, 1989, 1991, Craver 2009, Khalidi 2013 and Slater 2015.

⁹⁹ Mason 2020, p.60.

possible world.¹⁰⁰ Mason might reject other features of essentialism such as the requirements that the properties of an essence must be intrinsic and microstructural, but by holding this modal tenet her account would still be an essentialist theory of kinds,¹⁰¹ and the constructivist does not have to espouse an essentialism that needs a strong modal requirement to identify properties for the kind.

Finally, Mason's essentialist view of social kinds has, *per se*, some troubling consequences. Supposing that it is true that *K* is necessarily *F*, and so has the same properties across possible worlds, this does not entail that we have no control over the association of the properties with the kind. It would still be the case that for every possible world where kind *K* exists, there would still be people who decide which *F* is the relevant set of properties. Now, one might reply that claiming *K* is necessarily *F*, it means that the kind *K* exists in any possible world, even if no humans ever existed in that world. This would confirm that it is not up to people to decide which properties are associated with the kind. That would have two very unpalatable consequences. The first is that in possible worlds where no humans ever existed there would still be social kinds such as *New York State taxpayer* and *real estate agent*. The second would be that when people arrived at these kinds, what it would actually mean is that they would discover them, and so it would be the case that people do not invent the properties associated with *criminal law attorney* and *US congressperson*, but they discover them. Note that Mason goes to great lengths to show how her notion of essence is definitionally 'non-

¹⁰⁰ Essentialism is also coupled with the claim that certain properties are necessary for kind membership, but what Mason is concerned with here is the claim that a kind is necessarily associated with a set of properties.

¹⁰¹ See Griffiths 1999, LaPorte 2004, and Okasha 2002 for essentialist views that reject the intrinsic and microstructural requirement.

modal,' but this does not avoid the 'modal consequences' that she admits this notion has.¹⁰²

4.3 Between Intentional Constructivism and Emergentism

Now that I have claimed that social kinds are concepts, we can tackle the origin question. Those readers fond of unifying accounts will not be thrilled by my answer, as it is a pluralistic one. I claim that there are many different ways in which social kinds come into existence. However, those readers might be comforted by the fact that my pluralism is not chaotic or disorienting. Rather, it is what I call a 'well-tempered pluralism,' since I argue that there are two main accounts of the creation of social kinds. They are either intentionally created or emerge out of social interactions. This pluralism is therefore 'well-tempered' because it introduces order, arranging social kinds on a scale where on one extreme we find purely created social kinds and on the other we find purely emergent social kinds. Many social kinds lie between the two poles of the scale; partly created, and partly emergent.

Typically, social ontologists have argued that there is only one way in which social entities are created. I call the view according to which social entities arise out of social interactions 'emergentism,' and the view that we directly create social entities 'intentional constructivism.'¹⁰³ I call it 'intentional constructivism' to distinguish it from the broader constructivism (opposed to NBR) that I am defending here.

Those who believe that social entities are intentionally created represent the majority in the social ontology of the last three decades: Michael Bratman, Margaret

¹⁰² Mason (2021), p.3981.

¹⁰³ I borrow the terms 'constructivism' and 'emergentism' in this sense from Lo Presti 2013.

Gilbert, John Searle, Raimo Tuomela, and Ásta.¹⁰⁴ Although their views differ, they share the belief that social reality is the product of our intentionality. Intentionality is not to be understood here in the sense of something being deliberate or purposive, but in the more general sense of “the power of minds and mental states to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs.”¹⁰⁵

Importantly, many of these philosophers take intentionality to be collective.¹⁰⁶ However, they differ according to their respective explanations of collective intentionality itself, namely, how it differs from individual intentionality. Some, like Bratman, explain this in terms of the difference in content of individual and collective intentions; others, such as Searle and Tuomela, explain it in terms of a different mode of intention, and yet others still, such as Gilbert, explain it in terms of a difference of the subject that possesses the intention. There is disagreement even within these subsets of explanations of collective intentionality. For example, Searle claims that the ‘we-mode’ of collective intentionality is irreducible, whereas Tuomela claims that it is indeed reducible to the individual ‘I-mode’ of intentionality.¹⁰⁷

Constructivists usually talk about the intentionality of the collective type, but some constructivists claim that we can create social kinds through individual intentionality. For example, in criticizing Searle, Thomasson notes that quite often, the function of, for instance, artefactual kinds is assigned by their individual creator, not by

¹⁰⁴ Bratman 1987, Gilbert 1989, Searle 1995 and 2010, Tuomela 2002, and Ásta 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Jacob 2019.

¹⁰⁶ “Constructivism is the view that people, through the sharing of mental states – intentions, goals, commitments, and so on – or through declarative or performative speech acts, create social phenomena; social reality is relative to the mental states of individuals aimed at the construction of social relations and objects” (Lo Presti 2013, p. 6).

¹⁰⁷ See Schweikard and Schmid 2013 for different views of collective intentionality.

a group of people.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, the creation of the social kind is through individual, not collective, intentionality. One might reconcile the two views by holding that some kinds, such as the institutional kinds mentioned by Searle, are collectively created, whereas some other kinds, such as the artefactual kinds mentioned by Thomasson, are individually created.¹⁰⁹ However, there is still the idea that we create social entities, and social kinds in particular, through our intentionality

All these types of account have therefore one thing in common, namely that people need a certain degree of understanding in order for collective intentionality to occur. As Searle writes, “someone must be capable of understanding what the thing is for, or the function could never be assigned. At least some of the participants in the system of exchange must understand, consciously or unconsciously, that money is to buy things with, screwdrivers are for driving screws, and so forth.”¹¹⁰ This is an important aspect of these theories that, as we will see, emergentist theories lack.

A good example of constructing social objects would be the drawing of national borders. Think about when the borders of two or more states or countries are to be drawn. Further consider what seems to be a completely artificial border, a *fiat*, not a *bona fide* boundary, to use the distinction drawn by Barry Smith and Achille Varzi.¹¹¹ The lines surrounding an island for example, might be considered a *bona fide* boundary whereas the borders of a country would be a *fiat* boundary.¹¹² (Think about the borders of Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming, with their almost perfectly straight lines). The process

¹⁰⁸ Thomasson 2003a.

¹⁰⁹ For other views that take into account intentionality individually, and not collectively, see Epstein 2018.

¹¹⁰ Searle 1995, p. 22.

¹¹¹ See Smith and Varzi 2000.

¹¹² Note that not everyone would agree with this claim. For example, Varzi (2011) argues that most of the boundaries we consider to be *bona fide* are actually *fiat*.

of drawing borders in this way is one of creation; people get together, decide where to draw a line, proceed to draw that line on a map and a border, and a state has been created.

This example only illustrates the construction of a single social object, not a social kind itself. To see how constructivism may apply to the legal domain, consider the legislative process through which the United States Congress passes laws. Here is a simplified picture of the process. One or more representatives or senators sponsor(s) a bill, which is then studied by a committee. If the committee approves the bill and its changes (and does not send it to a subcommittee for further research), the bill then goes to the House of Representatives or the Senate floor. If the bill passes by a simple majority in the House of Representatives or the Senate, it moves on to the Senate or the House of Representatives where another committee examines the bill and, if it is then released, it is debated by congresspersons who will eventually vote on it. If the bill passes by a simple majority, a committee composed of House and Senate members will resolve any possible differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill before the final approval of the House and Senate. Finally, the President has ten days to either sign or veto the bill.

Intentional constructivism rather nicely captures the creation of those social kinds where a group of agents come together and make a collective decision in what we might call a 'formal' way. That is, it effectively accounts for those social kinds whose existence and properties are codified in a written and systematic manner. Passing a law and creating a legal kind like *permanent resident* or *New York State taxpayer*, requires the collective acceptance and collective intentionality of the legal kind that they purport to create. The congresspersons and members of the committee intentionally design the

concept that they have in mind. Constructivism therefore applies particularly well to the creation of legal kinds or, more generally, formal kinds. However, this does not rule out that certain more informal kinds are constructed as well. In order to remain as neutral as possible with respect to the question of which kinds are actually intentionally constructed and which are not, I have chosen legal kinds as uncontroversial examples of intentionally constructed kinds. However, we know that not all social kinds are created intentionally this way. This is when emergentism comes into play.

Emergentism has a longer tradition than constructivism. Indeed, it is part of a tradition that goes back at least as far as David Hume. In book III of his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-40), Hume presents a theory of the social world (of government, money, property, etc.), which he argues is created by social conventions. To introduce a rule, Hume argues, we need a certain community to share certain beliefs along with certain regular behaviors. Importantly, Hume argues, the convention itself need not be the object of a collective attitude; rather, it emerges out of common beliefs and regular behavior. As I define it, emergentism is the view that social objects emerge over time out of social interactions, where social interactions refer to both common beliefs and actions, as well as the idea that collective intentionality towards a category is not necessary for that kind to exist. Among the emergentists I would include the following: David Lewis (whose work *Convention* is directly inspired by Hume's analysis of social conventions) Ruth Millikan, and Cristina Bicchieri.¹¹³ Emergentism is also probably the most widely held view outside of philosophy, as most social scientists are ontologically and methodologically individualist. Among emergentist social scientists we could

¹¹³ Lewis 1969, Millikan 1999, Bicchieri 2006 and 2016.

include the following: Friedrich Hayek, Thomas Schelling, and Georg Simmel.¹¹⁴ Let me be clear. Emergentists have very different and diverse views, far more so than those held by the constructivists. There is simply no united front of emergentists. However, all of their views share the idea that we do not have to turn to collective intentionality to understand the creation of social objects.

Of course, emergentism nicely captures all of those social entities that do not necessarily require collective, or even individual, recognition. These entities are often of an informal social nature. Now, when I contrast formality and informality, I have to be clear. I do not equate ‘formal’ with ‘conventional.’ Many informal phenomena are conventional. Most of the examples of conventions that David Lewis discusses in *Convention* are actually informal: conformational behavior, imitation, signaling, etc. And by ‘informal’ social phenomena I mean those that are not properly codified (although they might later be codified, as we will see). Some examples of informal social phenomena are economic recessions and racism, as we have already seen, as well as fashion, fad, etc. All of these social entities arise out of a complex web of collective beliefs, actions, and sometimes physical constraints, but there need not be a collective recognition of the kinds themselves in order for them to exist. Part of the task of the social sciences is to unearth hidden social phenomena of which we are not necessarily aware, even though we participate in them; we might not know about the economic cycles or power relations we engage in, but they are nevertheless still part of our social life.

In which sense then is emergentism helpful to explain the creation of social kinds in the anti-realist picture I am drawing? At first glance, it would seem like emergentism

¹¹⁴ Durkheim 1895, Hayek 1948, Schelling 1978, Simmel 1910.

and NBR are the same, but they are not. NBR holds that social kinds have natural boundaries, and emergentism holds that social entities are the products of interactions. In this sense NBR is an emergentist view. However, if we take social kinds to be concepts, we may also be emergentist, to the extent that concepts are created not through intentionality but out of social practices. Many of the concepts we have are not intentionally created, but are the result of social practices we engage in. Take for example the kind *hipster* which, arguably, is not the result of an intentional creation but is rather the result of a complex cultural history. I would argue that we ought to extend emergentism to include social kinds concerning, for example, status within a social group, that may be the result of evolutionary processes. Some research in fact points to the fact that some evolutionary cognitive adaptations are responsible for the acquisition of certain social concepts.¹¹⁵

By this point, it should be obvious that emergentism is limited by its difficulty in explaining how certain formal social kinds can, for example, arise through collective agreement. The emergentist might claim that a particular formal social kind was created by a series of emergent social phenomena. For example, when President Lyndon B. Johnson created the office of the United States Secretary of Housing and Urban Development on September 9, 1965, his decision was based on a series of emerging and complex social phenomena, such as poverty and racial injustice, and the will to address them in the context of the Great Society program; a broad set of policies that Johnson wanted to develop and implement. I do not contest that there was an emergent causal background to Johnson's decision to create such an office. However, this does not explain how the social kind itself, *United States Secretary of Housing and Urban*

¹¹⁵ For an evolutionary explanation of social cognition see Ackerman et al. (2012),

Development, was created, only what led to the creation of that social kind which is an altogether different claim. There is an important difference between, on the one hand, the causal links leading to the creation of a social kind and, on the other hand, the creation of a social kind. Constructivism and emergentism pertain to the latter, not the former.

Having explained what I take to be the pros and cons of both constructivism and emergentism, I can now present my own view through which I will seek to combine the virtues of both accounts while avoiding their limitations.¹¹⁶

4.4 A Well-Tempered Pluralism

Imagine social kinds as if they were on a scale. At one end of the scale are paradigmatic examples of constructed social kinds. Here you will find formal kinds that are created in the legal and political domains such as *New York taxpayer* or *President of the European Commission*. As we saw above, I mentioned social kinds whose properties are codified in written documents.¹¹⁷ At the other end of the scale are paradigmatic cases of emergent kinds. Good examples of such cases would be social kinds such as *goth* and *hipster*. I take these paradigmatic cases of emergentism because subcultures (and cultures in general) are not created by *fiat*.

Note that I am not endorsing a particular form of intentional constructivism or emergentism. It might be the case that the right sort of intentional constructivism or emergentism depends on the social kinds we are considering. For example, on the

¹¹⁶ I prefer to talk about 'limits' or 'limitations' rather than bad features or defects of these families of views, because it is more a matter of the scope of the views rather than any specific theoretical flaws.

¹¹⁷ Again, some informal kinds may very well be intentionally constructed without the help of documents.

constructivist side, Searle's account, based on collective acceptance and constitutive rules, may provide a better explanation of certain legal kinds, whereas Thomasson's account, based on individual intentionality, may provide a better explanation of artefactual kinds. Alternatively, on the emergentist side, Millikan's account based on functions might provide a better explanation of the origin of linguistic kinds, whereas Bicchieri's account, based on game theory, might provide a better explanation of norm kinds. This variety of views is in line with the pluralistic spirit of my work.

It is interesting to note that a difference between the two types of social kinds is that the production of emergent kinds tends to proceed from the objects to the kind, whereas for the intentionally constructed kinds it is the opposite, insofar as it begins with the kind. Let me explain. In order to have purely emergent kinds, you need to have several social entities that are associated with certain properties; as is the case, for example, with *metalhead*. By contrast, in the case of purely constructed kinds, you create the kind, and only then apply it to the instances. For example, when we create a legal kind such as *Member of the European Parliament*, we first characterize the properties that belong to it, such as voting on most European Union laws, or electing the President of the European Commission, and only after some people are designated as members of the European Parliament do they belong to that kind. It is not always the case, but emergence often proceeds from the objects to the kind, whereas construction often proceeds from the kind to the objects.¹¹⁸

So much for the two ends of the scale. What about what is in the middle of it? I believe that most social kinds will actually be found in the middle of the scale. Now,

¹¹⁸ This would explain how it seems that intentionally constructed kinds tend to create social objects, whereas emergent kinds tend to represent social objects. However, I am not so sure if the distinction can be drawn so clearly.

social kinds may change, as society changes, and this is due to either the intentional construction or the emergence of new properties. For certain social kinds that are intentionally constructed, certain new properties later emerge, while other emerging social kinds find new properties that are intentionally created. Let us see how.

Take for example the kind *unemployed*. The concept of it emerges because of economic and social processes. However, this category can be taken up by a legislative body who then attach certain properties to it, such as unemployed people's entitlement to welfare. The social kind has therefore emerged, but it has subsequently acquired constructed properties. The same applies on the other side of the scale when we account for constructed kinds that acquire emergent properties. Take, for example, the kind *New York State taxpayer*. This is a constructed category with certain legal properties, but which can later acquire emergent properties; fiscal sociology makes precise studies of actual taxpayers' behaviors and motivations within different states and countries. These properties only emerge after the legal kind is put in place. My view is therefore pluralistic, as it does not explain the creation of social kinds in a single way. It is also well-tempered (as Figure 1 shows) because it ascribes an order to the creation and constitution of social kinds.¹¹⁹ Social kinds are on a scale. At one end are purely emergent kinds, whereas at the other end are purely intentionally constructed kinds. In the middle we find space for mixed kinds; that is, either emergent kinds that acquire constructed properties or constructed kinds that acquire emergent properties.

¹¹⁹ This feature distinguishes it from, for example, a pluralism that is not well-tempered, such as that of Epstein (2014).

Emergent

Mixed

Intentionally Constructed

<i>Hipster</i>	<i>Unemployed</i>	<i>Taxpayer</i>	<i>Member of the European Parliament</i>
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Fig. 1

I maintain that the virtues of well-tempered pluralism are multifold. First, it captures all of those kinds that intentional constructivism and emergentism alone cannot take into account. We saw how these two types of views are not poor theoretical constructs, only that they are limited in their respective scopes. Second, well-tempered pluralism accounts for the lifetime of social kinds after they are established: mixed kinds result from changes that take place after a kind has been created, and the subsequent changes are explained in either constructivist or emergentist terms. Third, this account expresses a more fundamental idea about the social world; that the society we live in is both the product of our conscious efforts to build something as well as the result of interactions over which we have no control or even a complete understanding. This is an important premise for the philosophical and scientific investigations of social reality.

This account cannot say, for each case, which social kind is intentionally constructed, and which is emergent. However, it can serve as a general framework for investigating social kinds, by giving the social ontologist a blueprint for studying specific social kinds. That said, I acknowledge that due to the open and pluralistic nature of my account, the reader will be disappointed if they sought a single formula explaining the production of all social kinds. I concede that despite the well-tempered quality of my

view, this pluralism and its ecumenical intent may appear to some as precisely its limitation as it does not offer a unifying account. Yet, what they see as my view's cardinal sin, I take to be its chief theoretical virtue, for if the social world exhibits such diversity and variety, so too must our social ontology. However, there are other possible objections that can be raised against my account and to these I will now move in order to provide further clarification.

4.5 Similar, but Distinct

One could argue that in some cases, where there appears to be only one mixed kind, there are actually two: one that emerged and another that was constructed. Let us return to the example of *unemployed*. Suppose that there is a law concerning unemployment. Among the properties that it attributes to unemployed people is their eligibility to receive certain welfare benefits. Now, let us suppose that some people manage to qualify for these welfare benefits, although they work informally. It seems that these people enjoy the properties of the legal kind *unemployed*, even though they actually belong to the kind *employed*, as they have a job. This lets us know that we have to make a distinction between the legal kind *unemployed* and the informal kind *unemployed*. It would thus be a mistake to talk about mixed kinds as they could turn out not to be mixed at all, but separate.

I agree that there might be many cases like this one, as happens when a law is widely disregarded. I also agree that there is a discrepancy between the two kinds in those cases, and that we should therefore treat them as two separate categories, although they may have the same name. However, my view accommodates this objection since it says nothing about which kinds are mixed and which are not. This is

actually an additional virtue of treating social kinds as concepts, as it allows them to have multiple distinct but similar concepts at the same time. In situations where the constructed element and the emergent element do not mix together, we would simply have two different categories. In the case of *unemployed*, we would have two kinds: one that is constructed and the other that is emergent.

4.6 Origin and Change

Another objection could be that there is an asymmetry between purely intentionally constructed kinds and purely emergent kinds on the one hand, and mixed kinds on the other. When it comes to the former I am talking about the real origin of the social kind, whereas in the latter case I am talking about what happens once the kind has already been created. Thus, if we want to discuss the original source of social kinds, all we need are constructed and emergent kinds, and not mixed kinds. According to this objection, my remarks about mixed kinds are therefore at best superfluous and at worst misleading.

I agree that my account concerns not only the origins of social kinds, but what happens after they are created. Ordinarily, accounts of social categories focus entirely on how social kinds are established in the first place. However, when it comes to making social kinds, we should not be concerned solely with their sources, but with everything that makes them what they are at any point over the course of their ontological career. Many kinds associated with the social sciences are concerned with neither purely constructed nor purely emergent, but rather mixed kinds. The making of social kinds should therefore concern not only their first appearance, but also what happens to them subsequently. Moreover, if we claim that certain social kinds change their identity when

certain properties emerge or are constructed, it follows that a new social kind has been created.

4.7 A Spectrum of Social Kinds?

I presented social kinds as being on a scale, but what if we had a spectrum instead? If we had a spectrum, we could show where specific kinds are located with greater accuracy. We would still have purely emergent kinds at one end of the spectrum, and purely constructed kinds at the other, but we would have a more accurate account of mixed kinds since we would have different degrees of intentional construction and emergence. How would that work? Depending on the mixed kind, we would have some that are closer to the constructivist end as they have a greater number of constructed properties, while we would have some that are closer to the emergentist side as they have a greater number of emergent properties. Take, for example, *marriage*, which is an emergent kind, but over which the state legislates. It may be the case that there are different degrees to which marriage is regulated by the law, and so in certain societies the kind may be closer to the intentional constructivist side, whereas in others it may be closer to the emergentist side. Using a spectrum to track social kinds would allow us to have a clearer and altogether more finely-grained analysis of social kinds.

I am sympathetic to the idea that there can be different degrees of emergence and construction. For example, in the case of *marriage*, sociologists and legal scholars could show us how, in certain societies, the institution of marriage is more regulated than in others. However, I am worried about how we could give this idea concrete application because it is hard to figure out how to measure these different degrees of emergence or construction. For example, would a measure be obtained by determining the sum of the

of the properties of a given kind? Would it be determined by the weight of certain properties? Perhaps both criteria combined? Even if we found the right criteria, how could we reliably count the number of properties or the weight of a property for any particular kind? In light of these issues, I do not think that we can implement the idea of a spectrum for social kinds.

4.8 Is *Planet* a Social Kind?

Another objection is that this is not only how social kinds are created, but also other types of kinds, such as folk kinds or even scientific kinds. Take for example the kind *planet* as a scientific kind. Obviously, the category has an ancient history that originated through linguistic practice and that then became central to astronomical studies. After Eris (a dwarf planet larger than Pluto) was discovered in 2005, the International Astronomical Union gathered in Prague in 2006 to decide to redefine 'planet.' According to the new definition, an astronomical body is a planet if it fulfills the three following conditions:

It must orbit a star (in our cosmic neighborhood, the Sun).

It must be big enough to have enough gravity to force it into a spherical shape.

It must be big enough that its gravity cleared away any other objects of a similar size near its orbit around the Sun.

NASA 2019

Note that the modification was the result not so much of the discovery of Eris but rather of a resolution with votes at the international astronomical union.¹²⁰ The category *planet* has, in a way, a history analogous to that of the kind *unemployed*; it arose out of certain practices and it later changed thanks to collective intentionality.

The problem is the following: does this process of creation and modification of the category *planet* make it a social kind? It is undeniable that linguistic practices are social practices, and that science is also a social activity, particularly when you think about it in terms of a democratic election of the candidate for the best *planet* definition! The view that the process of the creation of categories is what makes them social is widespread in the literature, but I believe it is deeply mistaken.

Human creation is not what makes the kind social, but it is rather the content of the category; as stipulated in the first chapter, it is the presence of social properties. The problem with saying that *planet* is a social category is that it reflects on the entities belonging to the category. Planets do not have social properties; they have physical ones which are studied in astronomy. The human touch does not itself make something social; man-made materials such as polystyrene are not social entities. However, one could push back and say that while the entities are not social, the kinds are. After all, the category *planet* is a human product; the planets are not.

I don't think this is viable for the same reason I gave for the nature of synthetic objects if being a product of human ingenuity is not a sufficient condition for an object to be social, why should it be for categories? If we accept the former, we have to accept the latter too. Now, I want to be clear that this does not imply that the creation of non-

¹²⁰ This is one of the reasons why the slogan 'science is not democratic,' although well-meaning in its reference to a growing distrust in science, is a bit misleading, as it depicts scientific endeavor in a monolithic and simplistic way.

social categories is in any way purer than the creation of social categories. Arguably, the states of New Mexico and Illinois had political and possibly patriotic reasons to contest the IAU definition of ‘planet,’ when New Mexico¹²¹ and Illinois,¹²² in 2007 and 2009 respectively, officially declared that Pluto is still a planet and not a dwarf planet, given that Clyde Tombaugh who discovered it was born in Illinois and was a long-time resident of New Mexico. Rather than redefining ‘planet,’ these ad hoc resolutions merely classified Pluto as a planet, but the point is that it could have easily affected the category itself for reasons that are unrelated to astronomy. This is something that does happen in science.¹²³ With this regard, I think that Ásta is wrong in claiming that from the fact that the science behind the distinction between the two sexes is “quite messy”, it follows that sex is a social category.¹²⁴ If these were true, then it would follow that all scientific kinds behind which the science is “quite messy” are social, even when they are chemical or physical kinds.

However, as I stressed in the second chapter, what makes a kind a social kind is the fact that its instances bear social properties, not that it has been created. Although social practices are pervasive, not everything is social. Claiming that human creation implies the mark of the social is not only misleading, but wrong. It falls prey to a genetic fallacy, as it assumes that the nature of an entity is the same as what originated it. Besides, we have seen that social kinds may emerge not only out of social practices, but also because of evolutionary cognitive adaptations.

¹²¹ Inskeep 2007.

¹²² Sample 2009.

¹²³ A particularly interesting case is that of *attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD)*: it has been argued that the category has been modeled as being associated with a single and specific neuropsychological basis, as this favors the selling of drugs treating the disorder (Furman 2008).

¹²⁴ Ásta 2013, 726.

CHAPTER 5

On Natural Kinds and Social Kinds

In metaphysics, philosophy of language, and philosophy of science, natural kinds have usually been considered to be categories that we may find in the natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, and biology. Kinds from other sciences such as the social sciences have always been ignored. Only in recent years have philosophers started to consider social kinds as possible candidates for natural kindhood. One of the most prominent attempts in this regard has been that of Muhammad Ali Khalidi. Building his view on the idea that natural kinds are kinds whose properties are causally related, he claims that those social kinds whose properties are causally related, such as *recession* and *racism*, are natural kinds, whereas social kinds whose properties are conventionally related, such as *permanent resident* and *Prime Minister*, are not natural kinds.¹²⁵ According to Khalidi, causality is what grounds the inductive power of social kinds. I argue, *pace* Khalidi, that there are social kinds that allow for scientific induction, but whose properties are not causally related, and offer an alternative to what allows scientific induction.

The purpose of this chapter is therefore twofold. First, I argue that even kinds whose properties are conventionally related can be natural kinds, provided they enjoy those epistemic features that are defining of natural kinds, namely their projectability. To illustrate this point, I resort to linguistic kinds and legal kinds as examples of social kinds whose properties are not causally related but that are projectible. Secondly, I argue

¹²⁵ Khalidi 2015.

that the Stable Property Cluster account (SPC) presented by Matthew Slater, according to which, what makes a kind natural is the stability of its underlying properties, which is the appropriate account for conventional social kinds.¹²⁶ Moreover, I claim that SPC is compatible with the anti-realist picture defended in this work.

5.1 Natural Kinds, Causality and Convention

The variety of views seems to confuse rather than help when it comes to understanding what philosophers refer to with the expression ‘natural kinds.’ One might think that giving examples of natural kinds would help. Typical examples of scientific kinds that philosophers give are the following: fundamental particles in physics, chemical elements in chemistry, and species in biology. However, this is only helpful to a certain extent, as there is some doubt that species, traditionally one of the most used examples, are actually natural kinds.¹²⁷ Moreover, I think it is misleading to call them ‘natural kinds,’ since, as we will see, social kinds may be natural kinds too.¹²⁸ However, I will stick to the common and current usage.

In order to have a clearer idea of what natural kinds are, we need to do two things. First, we have to remember the distinction between the taxonomy question and the ontology question. Recall that there is a difference between asking what natural kinds are, and asking what they consist of, and that we may answer the taxonomy question

¹²⁶ Slater 2015.

¹²⁷ For an example, see Ellis 2001 and Wilkerson 1993.

¹²⁸ Boyd (1991) and Dupré (1993) suggest using the expression ‘scientific kinds’ instead. Khalidi also laments the fact that the term ‘natural kinds’ is misleading, as it “may suggest a connection to natural sciences (conventionally, physics, chemistry, and biology) as opposed to the social sciences. [...] It might have been better to use Mill’s expression “real kind” instead, but unfortunately this expression has never caught on and is not a widely used expression” (Khalidi 2013, 4-5).

without engaging the ontology question.¹²⁹ Now, given that we narrowed the scope of our inquiry, we have to see what the views that try to answer the taxonomy question have in common. What they do have in common is that they all hold that natural kinds are kinds that serve an explanatory and/or inductive role in scientific practice. Now, this epistemic account is minimal enough to leave room for any available theory of natural kinds and, potentially, it includes any type of natural kind that can be found not only in the domain of the natural sciences, but potentially also in the social sciences. Thus, in what follows, I will hold onto this minimal account of natural kinds.

However, it is also important to answer the ontology question, as whether social kinds are natural kinds hinges on this answer. However, answering the ontology question about natural kinds is not as simple as answering the taxonomy question; there is a variety of accounts on offer. Essentialism used to be the most popular account, and it has been developed following Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam's arguments supporting semantic externalism.¹³⁰ Essentialism holds that natural kinds have an essence that is a property or a set of properties, and whose possession is necessary and sufficient for kind membership.¹³¹ In the last three decades, alternative and more flexible theories widened the scope of what is considered to be a natural kind. The Homeostatic Property Cluster (HPC) account, first presented by Richard Boyd, holds that natural kinds are associated with properties that are clustered thanks to homeostatic mechanisms, where the presence of certain properties makes more likely the presence of certain clusters of

¹²⁹ This is similar to the distinction Hacking draws between the gentle question, about whether there are natural kinds, and the stern question which asks what they are: "The gentle question is about what there is, the stern one about what must be" (Hacking 1990, 135).

¹³⁰ Kripke 1980 and Putnam 1975.

¹³¹ See Ellis 2001 and Wilkerson 1988 for examples of essentialist accounts.

properties at the exclusion of others.¹³² It is a causal mechanism that allows the cluster of properties to achieve this state of homeostasis. The fact that there is no single property of the cluster that is necessary for membership to the kind makes it an alternative to essentialist accounts of natural kinds, whose stricter requirements, such as the necessary and sufficient conditions of membership in the kind, make them particularly unfit to accommodate kinds with looser membership conditions such as biological kinds.¹³³ Moreover, the homeostatic mechanism makes the HPC account a viable alternative to more conventionalist accounts of natural kinds, according to which, natural kinds' existence depends on scientists carving up the world, since the properties of the kinds are associated with real causal mechanisms in the world, and not merely with our classificatory practices. The HPC account paved the way for treating social kinds as candidates for natural kinds. Although Richard Boyd mainly took biological species as paradigmatic examples of HPC kinds, he mentions how his view could account for social kinds too.¹³⁴

However, the HPC account faces some difficulties when it comes to species. Some worries have been raised that it cannot explain the phenomena of dimorphism or polymorphism, namely, the variations within a species,¹³⁵ and that it focuses on similarity within species rather than the preferred criterion adopted by biological systematics of having a common descent.¹³⁶ However, regardless of whether the HPC

¹³² Boyd 1988, 1989, 1991, 1999.

¹³³ For a defense of biological essentialism see Devitt 2008. However, this is not the only issue essentialism has. For a list of them, see chapter 1 of Khalidi 2013.

¹³⁴ See Boyd 1999. Interestingly, Boyd first introduced the HPC account to argue for his moral naturalism (Boyd 1988).

¹³⁵ Ereshefsky and Matthen 2005.

¹³⁶ Ereshefsky 2010.

account can be applied to species, it appears that it cannot be applied to all kinds, not even all biological kinds, as it has been shown that certain disease kinds are not captured by the HPC account.¹³⁷

Khalidi's account of natural kinds takes the HPC account's insight that the projectibility of natural kinds in the sciences is grounded in actual causal properties and relations, but it gets rid of homeostasis and mechanisms and instead builds on what Carl Craver calls a 'simple causal' theory of natural kinds, "appearing in generalizations that correctly describe the causal structure of the world regardless of whether a mechanism explains the clustering of properties definitive of the kind."¹³⁸ According to Khalidi, scientists would typically begin by finding certain correlations between properties that they would then try to explain in terms of causal relationships between the properties:

They [the scientists] find that when a (possibly loose) cluster of properties, P_1, \dots, P_m , is instantiated, it tends to give rise causally to another (possibly loose) cluster of properties, P_{m+1}, \dots, P_n , which may in turn give rise to others. Alternatively, the second cluster may tend to cause another iteration of the instantiation of the first cluster, in a cyclical fashion. There may also be more intricate causal relations among members of these clusters of properties. We then identify natural kinds either with the first subset of properties or with the entire set. Sometimes, the first subset of properties, which are causally prior, can be considered the set of "primary" properties of the natural kinds, while the second subset can be considered "secondary".

Khalidi 2013, p. 79

¹³⁷ Williams 2018.

¹³⁸ Craver 2009, 579.

Khalidi's view is therefore a causal cluster account like the HPC account, but more flexible than the HPC account since it does not have a homeostatic mechanism underlying the cluster. In *Natural Categories and Human Kinds*, Khalidi shows how this account of natural kinds implies that natural kinds are to be found not only in what some philosophers call the 'basic sciences,' namely the most fundamental branches of physics and chemistry, but also in the 'special sciences,' such as biology, geology, meteorology, zoology, and neurosciences, as well as in the social sciences.¹³⁹

We have seen in the third chapter on NBR how Khalidi draws a tripartition of social kinds, building on the different roles collective intentionality has: (1) kinds whose existence (and that of their instances) do not depend on our having attitudes towards them, such as *racism* and *recession*; (2) kinds whose existence depends on our having propositional attitudes towards them, but whose instances' existence does not depend on our having propositional attitudes towards them, such as *war* and *money*, and (3) social kinds whose existence and that of their instances depend on having propositional attitudes towards them, such as *permanent resident* and *Prime Minister*. Khalidi claims that social kinds of the first and second type can be natural kinds since their properties may be causally related. However, the third type of social kind cannot be natural kinds, as their properties are not causally, but merely conventionally, related. As Khalidi writes, "The main impediment to some social kinds being natural kinds has to do with the fact that the properties associated with them are so associated because of social rule or

¹³⁹ According to Khalidi, if we had to strictly follow the distinction between the categories of sciences, based on whether or not they are about the most elementary particles of reality, then even branches of physics, such as solid-state physics, geophysics, fluid mechanics and biophysics, and branches of chemistry, such as biochemistry, ecological chemistry, and maybe even organic chemistry should not be considered basic sciences, but special sciences instead (Khalidi 2013, 82).

convention. This implies that these kinds are invented rather than discovered.”¹⁴⁰ We have already seen how the claim that kinds are discovered is false because of the failure of NBR. However, let us overlook that for now, and let us reconstruct Khalidi’s argument that social kinds whose properties are conventionally related cannot be natural kinds:

Premise 1. All natural kinds are projectible kinds.

Premise 2. All projectible kinds are associated with properties that are causally related.

Premise 3. No conventional social kind is associated with properties that are causally related.

Conclusion. No conventional social kind is a natural kind.

I agree with premise 1, as I stated at the beginning that natural kinds are kinds that serve an explanatory or inductive role, and I also agree with premise 3, as I believe that there are kinds whose properties are not causally, but conventionally related. What I deny is premise 2 of his argument: not all projectible kinds are associated with properties that are causally related.

5.2 Linguistic Kinds and Legal Kinds

I argue that even some conventional kinds can be natural kinds, since even conventional kinds can play an explanatory and predictive role, regardless of whether their properties

¹⁴⁰ Khalidi 2015, 106. Others who claim that social kinds may be natural kinds because of causality are Mallon 2003, 2016, and Mason 2016.

are the results of causal processes. As key examples of conventional kinds that can be natural kinds, I will resort to linguistic kinds and legal kinds.

Granted that linguistics has as its subject matter the social and conventional phenomenon of language, we might find good examples of natural kinds in this discipline. Like most sciences, linguistics aims at giving not only explanations, but also predictions about its objects of inquiry. As Paul Égré writes:

“Like physicists who seek a set of laws that would enable them to characterize the various possible states of a system over time, linguists seek a set of rules that would enable them to derive the various possible sentences a competent speaker is liable to say or accept. [...] The purpose of a theory in linguistics, as in the other empirical sciences, is to formulate explanatory and predictive hypotheses about the nature of linguistic phenomena. A hypothesis is predictive if it can explain data not already predicted by the theory, or not readily accessible.”

Égré 2018, 690

Égré mentions an example of a linguistic category that is a good example of a kind being natural, namely, the *negative polarity item (NPI)*. Expressions like ‘any’ or ‘ever’ belong to this kind, as their occurrence seems to require a sort of negative context, as, for example, in the sentence “They did not buy any books.” It cannot be the case that whenever a negative polarity item appears, it has to be preceded by a negation, as there can be sentence like “I doubt that they bought any books.”

According to the view first introduced by Gilles Fauconnier (1975) and later developed by William Ladusaw (1979) and known as the ‘Fauconnier-Ladusaw Generalization’ or the ‘Fauconnier-Ladusaw Hypothesis,’ a negative polarity item is

grammatical only if it appears in what is called a ‘monotone decreasing’ environment, namely an environment behaving like a monotonically decreasing function.¹⁴¹ This generalization shows an important correlation between a syntactic element (the occurrence of negative polarity items) and a semantic element (the occurrence in a monotone decreasing environment).¹⁴² *Negative polarity item* is a natural kind, given its inductive power.

There is an objection that can be raised to linguistic kinds being natural kinds which depends on Khalidi’s notion of ‘conventional,’ which is arguably ambiguous. If by that he means ‘arbitrary,’ then linguistic kinds are still natural kinds, since it seems the way language works is indeed arbitrary. However, if by ‘conventional’ he means something that is done by *fiat* decision, then one might object that language is not born out of thought-out decisions, and so Khalidi’s view of natural kinds still applies to linguistic kinds. Let us allow this objection for a moment.

I still believe that there are social kinds, whose properties are related by *fiat* and causally, that are also natural kinds: legal kinds. If you look at the study of the law and, by that I mean a merely descriptive study of the law, that does not presuppose any particular philosophy of law (natural law theory, legal positivism, etc.). You may find legal kinds that allow for predictions, featuring in explanations and empirical generalizations across systems of law or within systems of law. Think about the

¹⁴¹ “A function f is monotonically decreasing if it reverses the order of its arguments, for example, if it is such that $f(y) < f(x)$ when $x < y$. By extension, a function from sets to sets is monotonically decreasing if it reverses the inclusion relationship between the sets. Semantically, however, determiners such (p.694) as “a,” “no,” “every” can be treated as expressing relations between two sets” (Égré 2018, 693-4).

¹⁴² The story is a bit more complicated as the generalization has been reformulated into the ‘Fauconnier-Ladusaw-Fintel Generalization,’ but for our purposes it is enough to show the generalization in its original form.

distinction, in common law legal systems, between *civil law* and *criminal law*. One knows that *civil law* deals with cases such as breach of contract, defamation, tort, etc., and the defendant, if found liable, has to compensate the plaintiff; in most cases, with money. One knows that in *criminal law* cases such as murder, assault, and theft, the defendant, if found guilty, is usually punished with imprisonment. Thus, one knows that different branches of the law imply different sets of properties associated with them, even if they have been created by *fiat*.

5.3 Stable Properties

If I am right, and linguistic kinds and legal kinds are natural kinds, then which account should we favor for natural kinds? Any view based on causality, such as Khalidi's causal nodes account or the homeostatic property cluster account, seems inadequate because of its restrictions, and the same would be true, obviously, of essentialism. I claim that the best account available is the Stable Property Cluster (SPC) given by Matthew Slater.¹⁴³ His account shifts the focus from the ontological ground – the essence or the homeostatic property cluster for induction and explanation – to the epistemic grounding of the kind for induction and explanation. In other words, the account focuses on the stability of the kind rather than on what causes this stability. However, I believe that this still leaves room for an explanation of what grounds the stability in terms of other views, such as essentialism or the HPC. It may be that some kinds, such as the ones studied by physics, have essences, whereas biological kinds have homeostatic property

¹⁴³ Slater 2015.

clusters.¹⁴⁴ It is not my goal here to press this point, but I think it is an advantage of SPC that it leaves space for a form of pluralism concerning natural kinds.

Being this flexible, the SPC therefore includes as natural all kinds studied by the social sciences, regardless of the underlying causality, as what really matters is the stability relevant to a particular discipline which grants the strength of the induction. This is also compatible with the anti-realist picture of social kinds defended here. From the fact that social kinds have a constructed nature it does not follow that they cannot be epistemically robust enough to support induction since some possess a cluster of properties enjoying the stability required to meet the empirical constraints for what counts as a natural kind. Slater makes clear how his view has this anti-realist flavor:

Property clusters which are cliquishly-stable for a given science, project, research program, or what have you, offer certain fixed points for those inquiries in the sense that for possible manipulations relevant to those pursuits, we may count on finding the clustered properties together, where we find some of them. So possibly, some clusters are only natural kinds for particular domain of inquiry.

Slater 2015, 38

Given that social kinds are devices we use to group and represent the social world, so are the kinds among them that play the inductive role characteristic of natural kinds. One might say that even in the case of linguistic kinds and legal kinds, their properties are causally related because they have become the way they are as a result of a chain of causal processes. For example, the instances of the linguistic kind *verb* in the English

¹⁴⁴ I will not venture further here, but I believe this would also explain how scientific disciplines have different levels of accuracy.

language have the properties of a certain tense, aspect, and mood, and these are the result of a complicated causal history. Or in the case of *civil law* and *criminal law*, they are what they are in Common Law countries because of the historical developments of the law in the Anglo-Saxon world.

I do not contest that there is such a causal background story behind how the properties of the kinds hung together, although it is hardly trackable. However, this very same causal process does not entail that the properties of linguistic kinds and legal kinds are causally related. For example, the properties of being indicative or subjunctive, associated with the kind *verb*, are not causal properties, even if they are what they are because of a causal history of language use.

CHAPTER 6

Construction and Value-ladenness

This chapter analyses the role that moral and practical values play in the making of social kinds. It is often remarked that social sciences, more than other branches of the sciences, are value-laden. However, what does it mean for social sciences to be value-laden? Understanding how values play into social kinds helps us to understand how social sciences are value-laden. In this chapter I argue that there is a distinction to be made between the ways in which values play a role when it comes to social kinds, and that my anti-realist account is better at accommodating value-laden kinds than NBR.

This chapter is structured as follows. I first clarify the types of values we are concerned with and show why value-ladenness matters, as it concerns the debate over the objectivity of the social sciences. I then show that the first way in which values come into play is that many social kinds are themselves value-laden, namely, that they have properties of a normative nature. In this sense, they are parallel to thick concepts in metaethics. I shall give examples of value-laden kinds from the literature and show that constructivists need not be realist about values, unlike NBR which needs to be realist about values or else deny the existence of value-laden social kinds. The other way in which normativity comes into play is when certain decisions of a normative nature must be made when it comes to tracing the boundaries of the kind. I highlight that the fact that the decisions are of a normative nature does not imply that the social kinds themselves are value-laden. Again, NBR cannot accommodate this scientific practice, and I give several examples. Finally, I argue that a view that is apparently similar to the

one I presented here - Sally Haslanger's ameliorative approach toward social kinds - is actually unfit, as it endorses NBR.

6.1 Values and Objectivity

Max Weber famously noted that the place of these kinds of values in the social sciences is in the selection of research topics, but that they were of limited use elsewhere. This remark relies on his distinction between 'value judgement' and 'value relevance.'¹⁴⁵ Value judgements are judgements based on the moral and social values we hold and are the ones that must be avoided by the social scientist when it comes to proposing and defending social theories. Value relevance pertains instead to how the subject of scientific inquiry relates to our moral and social interests, and social scientists are allowed to be guided by this in the selection of the topic of investigation. Thus, in Weber's view, social scientists might be interested in studying, for example, gender relations for moral reasons, as they are vested in seeing if and how they are imbalanced and how to change them, but their study must be purely descriptive.

The problem that Weber and others raise with regard to the place of values in the social sciences is about how value judgments, not value relevance, affect the objectivity of the scientific endeavor. Philosophers of science note that in science, values are hardly avoidable when it comes to theory selection; virtues such as simplicity, conservatism, and modesty are considered points in favor of a theory because scientists value them.¹⁴⁶ These are, however, epistemic values, and they are widely considered to be acceptable;

¹⁴⁵ "Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is colored by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us. It is significant because it reveals relationships which are important to us due to their connection with our values. Only because and to the extent that this is the case is it worthwhile for us to know it in its individual features" (Weber 1949, 76).

¹⁴⁶ See Kuhn 1977, 320-339 and Quine and Ullian 1970.

of course, how to engage in a cost-benefit analysis and weigh one virtue against another when it comes to choosing a theory remains a hairy issue.

The more contentious kinds of values I am concerned with here are moral values in the context of the social sciences and social ontology. Of course, one might raise similar questions when it comes to non-social sciences, but I am concerned here with the social ones. Some argue that the problem with value-laden categories is that they lack the objectivity science should aspire to.¹⁴⁷ Naturalists claim that a scientific analysis should be purely factual, involving only the description of facts without the input of values, given that disagreements on value judgments cannot be resolved on purely empirical grounds. This is what Reiss and Sprenger call the ‘Value-Free Ideal,’ according to which “scientists should strive to minimize the influence of contextual values on scientific reasoning, e.g., in gathering evidence and assessing/accepting scientific theories.”¹⁴⁸ However, not everyone endorses this ideal, as normativists think that, far from value judgements constituting an obstacle to scientific objectivity, they actually improve it. For example, Kenneth Clark and Tommie Shelby, in their work on American ghettos, argue that social science cannot be objective as long as it does not unearth and defend the moral values upon which it is founded.¹⁴⁹

My goal for this chapter is not to argue for or against the Value-Free Ideal. My objective is rather to see how, in practice, social kinds are constructed in science and social ontology, and how values play a role in it. Even if one believes that moral values

¹⁴⁷ “The challenge posed by evaluative categories (or the evaluative dimension of certain categories) in the social sciences is a real one; in my view, it poses the largest obstacle to the discovery of natural kinds in the social sciences” (Khalidi 2013, 163).

¹⁴⁸ Reiss and Sprenger (2014).

¹⁴⁹ Clark (1965) and Shelby (2016). For an overview and collection of naturalist and normativist works in the philosophy of the social sciences, see Risjord (2016).

are an obstacle to objective social science, one may still produce an account of value-laden kinds. Some of these categories are used in science, some are not. I believe then, that even if values were an obstacle to good social science they would hardly be an avoidable part of it.

6.2 Value-laden social kinds

I mentioned how philosophers of social science have been interested in normative social kinds. However, they do not refer to them as kinds, but as ‘thick concepts.’ Given that the constructivist account considers social kinds as concepts, it allows us to use the literature on thick concepts for the analysis of social kinds.

The expression ‘thick concepts’ comes from metaethics, where a distinction is drawn between ‘thin concepts’ and ‘thick concepts.’ Thin concepts are purely evaluative concepts such as ‘right’ and ‘bad.’ Labeling an action as ‘right’ does not involve any non-evaluative description *per se*. On the contrary, thick concepts, such as ‘selfish’ or ‘cruel’ imply both an evaluative and a non-evaluative description. Normally, if an action is selfish, it is not only bad, but bad in a peculiar way, as it involves the person acting in a way that prioritizes herself over others.¹⁵⁰

In the social world, value-laden kinds parallel thick concepts as they imply both evaluative and non-evaluative descriptions. Take for example the category ‘terrorist.’ Given the serious policy implications of its understanding, this is a vexed but important category to consider. Many are the definitions that have been given both by public institutions and scholars, but it is not an easy task to find a good one. As even former secretary-general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, said: “The moral authority of the

¹⁵⁰ See Väyrynen 2016.

United Nations and its strength in condemning terrorism have been tampered by the inability of Member States to agree on a comprehensive convention that includes a definition.”¹⁵¹

The official definition one can find in the same 2005 United Nations secretary-general’s report I just quoted is problematic too:

[...] any action constitutes terrorism if it is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a Government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act.

Annan 2005, p. 26.

The problem with this definition is that it excludes non-civilians and combatants as possible targets of terrorist acts. However, it seems that in many cases terrorist acts specifically target non-civilians, and they are still terrorist acts. Take for example the September 11 attacks. According to the U.N. definition, the attacks on the World Trade Center constitute terrorism because they were directed against civilians, whereas the attack on the Pentagon would not constitute terrorism because they were directed against non-civilians. This seems to be at odds with what we intuitively understand as terrorism.

Interestingly, the reason why the definition is phrased in this way is that it excludes those who, fighting an authoritarian government, target combatants and non-civilians and that, in the eye of public opinion, should be considered ‘freedom fighters’

¹⁵¹ Annan 2005.

and not terrorists. The thing is that, in most circumstances, the term ‘terrorist’ refers to a morally despicable person or a violent action that is not morally justifiable.

The sharp value judgement that the category ‘terrorist’ implies makes it a perfect example of a value-laden social kind. To see how sharply the value judgement is implicit in the category, take the social kind *war*. While the word ‘war’ might be a value-laden kind too (except for fervent warmongers, wars tend to be considered bad for human civilization even when they are believed to be justified), the category *war* does not imply per se that wars are always morally impermissible. After all, public opinion has always been divided on whether a certain war is just or unjust, justified or unjustified, and there is even a ‘just war’ theory. That is not the case for terrorism. There is no such thing as a good terrorist or a morally justifiable terrorist action, and no ‘just terrorist’ theory. This does not mean that there could never be such a thing if we shifted the content of the concept from the way it is used now and change the membership.¹⁵² However, as things stand, the categories *terrorism* and *terrorist* bear a sharp morally negative connotation.

While *terrorist* is a clear example of a value-laden kind, others are not, and it is a distinctly philosophical task to unearth the underlying values. Take the example of ‘addiction,’ characterized by Gary Becker and Kevin Murphy in their *A Theory of Rational Addiction* (1988) “as usually rational in the sense of involving forward-looking maximization with stable preferences” (75). The goal of Becker and Murphy (belonging to the Chicago School that particularly tried to commit to value-neutral economics) was to give an account of addiction that would be different to our folk notion of addiction, to the extent that it was value-free. Djordjevic and Herfeld (2021) convincingly showed

¹⁵² The terms ‘terror’ and the cognates ‘terrorist’ and ‘terrorism’ did not always have this negative connotation; indeed, they had a positive connotation in the way they were used by the Jacobins during the French Revolution (Primoratz 2018).

that, despite their efforts, Becker and Murphy's concept of addiction is still thick, since they make a distinction between harmful and beneficial addictions that still rely on value judgements.

Since it is debatable if *addiction* counts as a social category (some claim that we should consider addiction merely as a brain disorder) take *segregation* as another example of a social kind over which people argue whether it is value-laden or not. For example, Tommie Shelby treats *segregation* as a social kind that is not value-laden: "I also treat "segregation" as a morally neutral term rather than as an expression of criticism. [...] I am also not, on the basis of this terminology alone, attributing unjust causes to all forms of segregation."¹⁵³ Others, such as Ronald Sundstrom, believe that *segregation* is a category for which no value-neutral definition is possible: "The purpose of drawing attention to the fact-value link in classic segregation studies in this essay is to go a step further and argue that even value-neutrality, especially in social studies of race and racism, is undesirable and impossible."¹⁵⁴

This is one way then in which values may play a role: when normative properties are associated with the kind. We can now move on to the other way in which values are involved.

6.3 Boundary Tracings and Normative Decisions

When normative reasons guide our drawing of the boundaries of social kinds, this is where values are again involved: in the making of the category. Let us look at some examples of how normative reasons may determine the drawing of social kinds.

¹⁵³ Shelby 2016, 39.

¹⁵⁴ Sundstrom 2004, 61.

Let us begin with a couple of examples that we have already found along the way: *economic recession* and *segregation*. Remember that a criticism of the definition put forward by the NBER - according to which an economic recession is a decline in economic activity lasting more than a few months - is based on the policy outcomes of that choice, as defining it that way might cause delay in the policy responses to the crisis. As for *segregation*, the case is particularly interesting, since Shelby has normative reasons for giving a value-neutral account: “The definition I offer is meant to be neutral on whether segregation patterns are good or bad, though it is motivated by normative concerns”.¹⁵⁵ This case is particularly interesting because the category itself is not value-laden. Normative reasons may impel us to get rid of the normative properties associated with a kind, and the normative nature of the decision concerning the boundaries of the kind does not make the kind itself value-laden.

Another example is that of *man* and *woman* as normative kinds; gender-related norms that were (or are) followed, such as that men must provide for the family, whereas women must do household chores. These are normative implications that are attached to the social kinds which we might want to change for the purpose of equality, and by doing that we remove the normative content of the social kind. Thus, what happens is that we remove a normative content for normative reasons. Of course, different normative decisions might instead make the kind value-laden: we have seen that this is the case for Sundstrom and his view on segregation.

Let us now look at other examples of value-laden social kinds. Julian Reiss’s recent work (2017) has convincingly shown how values are an integral part of the scientific process in economics. His article has the goal of unearthing and understanding the

¹⁵⁵ Shelby 2016, 289.

normative underpinnings of economics that are often ignored by economists who believe in a sharp dichotomy and separation between facts and values.¹⁵⁶ He gives several examples of categories such as *consumer price*, *gross domestic product (GDP)*, and *unemployment*, whose construction requires value judgment. For example, consumer price level measurements usually track the cost of purchasing a fixed basket of goods through time. However, that requires either tracking the expenditures of a household by weighing household budgets in proportion to what are the shares in the overall expenditure and then favoring households with larger expenditures, or weighing every household equally.¹⁵⁷

Well-being is yet another social kind that is particularly important if we want to understand value-ladenness. *Well-being* is a kind central to several sciences, from economics to psychology, and well-being indicators and measurements are important tools for policymaking. Clearly, a problem with *well-being* is how to define it, and the process of defining it involves the choice of certain values over others. In her work on the science of well-being, Anna Alexandrova discusses various views of well-being in scientific practice, and how scientific theories of well-being, what she calls ‘constructs,’ are informed by philosophical theories.¹⁵⁸ According to the ‘average affect’ construct, well-being is an emotional balance; the ratio of positive to negative emotions that a person has over time. According to another construct, well-being corresponds to life satisfaction, namely, the balance of what we value and prioritize in our lives. It is different from the average affect view, as it does not only take experiences into account.

¹⁵⁶ Reiss 2017.

¹⁵⁷ Reiss 2017, 7.

¹⁵⁸ Alexandrova 2015.

Another view takes well-being to be ‘flourishing,’ in the sense of meaning and accomplishment.¹⁵⁹ All these views are respectively informed by the following philosophical theories of well-being: hedonism, subjectivism, and eudaimonism. This is clearly a case where values determine the boundary of a kind and, by consequence, even the methods of measurement, as these theoretical constructs of well-being imply different criteria for the measurement of well-being.

This is a case of boundary drawing where normative reasons clash, but there might be a conflict between descriptive and normative reasons too. Godman and Marchionni (Ms.) discuss how there are two different ways to model social kinds, a ‘representation-first’ modelling and an ‘emancipation-first’ modelling, where the former takes an apt representation of the social world as the priority, whereas the latter takes moral and political values as the priority.

Take again *terrorist* as an example, and the definition that we saw, as “any action constitutes terrorism if it is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a Government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act.” On the one hand, this definition might be too broad as it includes actions that people would not commonly classify as terrorist. Take for instance a police unit whose task is to contain a demonstration and that opens fire on the protesters, even though they were not actually allowed to do so. In this case, we have an unlawful violent act that appears to intimidate or coerce a civilian population. Again, we do not want to include the violence of the state under the label of ‘terrorism.’ More generally, this definition would include state actors’ actions as terrorist. The problem with this broad definition is that

¹⁵⁹ I took these three as examples, but there are many more views.

it encompasses too much, rendering the category of *terrorist* useless and contrary to common sense, as the actions of the state tend not to be regarded as terrorist actions, even if morally reprehensible.¹⁶⁰ This is the more descriptive point of view.

On the other hand, one might make the claim that we ought to consider state actions to be terrorist actions when they involve violence or the threat of violence with the goal of inducing terror with an ideological purpose. We might want to draw the boundaries of terrorism in a broader way because our goal is to make the point that these actions are as morally abhorrent as when they are performed by a non-state actor.¹⁶¹ Note that fixing the membership of social kinds as *social kind* is tricky, since categories may be created using a list of properties, but deliberately excluding some people or things that possess those properties. For example, white supremacists' violent actions motivated by ideological reasons with the goal of spreading terror are not as often labeled 'terrorist' as Islamic extremists' violent actions motivated by ideological reasons with the goal of spreading terror.¹⁶² This would then require a change in the way in which we actually use the category *terrorist* rather than an explicitly different definition of the kind.

Another interesting case of a clash between descriptive and normative requirements is the problem of 'reduced attribution,' as some studies report that if we represent something as natural rather than social, this will impact our behavior in changing the phenomenon, regardless of whether the phenomenon is natural or social.¹⁶³ For example, if the phenomenon of racism is represented as naturally occurring

¹⁶⁰ This is the view defended by Wight 2015.

¹⁶¹ The equivalence between state and non-state terrorism has been often defended by Noam Chomsky. See for example Chomsky 2015.

¹⁶² Editorial Board of the New York Times 2019.

¹⁶³ See Mallon 2016, 94-110 for a discussion of reduced attribution and interactive kinds.

rather than being socially constructed, we might feel less inclined to try to change it. The issue raised is therefore about the legitimacy for scientists to characterize certain categories as natural, even if it is descriptively appropriate, because of the possible influence on the behavior of people.

It is not my intent to find a criterion on how to balance descriptive and normative requirements; my objective was to show how in practice values come into play in constructing social kinds. Now that we have seen how our normative considerations play a role in constructing social kinds, I want to move on to how constructivism better accommodates the existence of value-laden kinds compared with the underlying metaphysics of Haslanger's ameliorative approach.

6.4 The Problem With Haslanger's Ameliorative Approach

An important facet of the endeavors of antiracist and feminist thinkers has been to find a good theory of the social world that would help them with their moral and practical concern for justice. With this regard, Sally Haslanger has developed an influential view in social ontology, delineating what she calls the 'ameliorative project' of social kinds, which purports to elucidate how we are supposed to modify, from a moral standpoint, certain social categories, in particular those of race and gender.¹⁶⁴ The way Haslanger defines it, "ameliorative analyses elucidate "our" legitimate purposes and what concept of F-ness (if any) would serve them best (the target concept). Normative input is needed."¹⁶⁵ With this theoretical framework in mind, Haslanger suggests we should define gender categories, at least in part, on the basis of the place in society of their

¹⁶⁴ Haslanger 2012.

¹⁶⁵ Haslanger 2012, 376.

instances, where men are systematically privileged and women are systematically oppressed.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, she defines race categories in terms of the hierarchical place of their instances in society.¹⁶⁷ I am not interested in judging the aptness of these definitions, but rather how Haslanger reconciles this normative approach with her own metaphysical views on social categories.¹⁶⁸ I claim that Haslanger does not have an underlying metaphysics of social kinds that is consistent with her normative purposes. Let us see why.

Haslanger says she is a ‘critical realist,’ by which she means that her social construction claims meet the hallmark of certain versions of realism, naturalism, and objectivism about kinds. By being realist, she means that claims purporting to describe the domain are truth-apt, namely that they are either true or false, and at least some of them are true, and by being naturalist she means that all entities, physical and non-physical, are part of the causal order of the universe. But what interests us is what she says with regard to objectivism about kinds. She says that a kind is “metaphysically objective” when “the boundaries of the type—what is and what isn’t member of the type—correspond to real differences. In other words, there is something about how things are in virtue of which the members of the type differ from non-members.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ “*S is a woman* iff_{df} *S* is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) and *S* is “marked” as target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female’s biological role in reproduction.

S is a man iff_{df} *S* is systematically privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and *S* is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male’s biological role in reproduction” (Haslanger 2012, p.230).

¹⁶⁷ “A group is *racialized* (in context *C*) if and only if (by definition) its members are (or would be) socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) (in *C*), and the group is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region.” (Haslanger 2012, p.308).

¹⁶⁸ For criticisms of the definitions see Bach 2012 and 2016, Jenkins 2016, and Richey 2018.

¹⁶⁹ Haslanger 2012, 203.

Haslanger goes to great lengths to show how the ontological dependence of social kinds on ourselves does not mean that kinds trace real differences in the world.

All of this should remind us of something: Natural Boundaries Realism. It seems that by being a critical realist, Haslanger endorses NBR. I think that this is inconsistent with the intents of the ameliorative approach, because if the boundaries of the kinds are already traced, how can we put our normative input into the modelling of the kind? If the boundaries are already out there in the world, then only our pure empirical research, and not our values, should guide us in finding them. Moreover, constructivism is less ontological costly with regard to value-laden social kinds themselves because it does not have to be ontologically committed to the existence of values. A supporter of NBR must instead claim that, given there are value-laden social kinds not directly conceived by our thoughts, values must exist too.

The ameliorative approach, and more generally any view that acknowledges a normative input in the modeling of social kinds, is better accommodated by an anti-realist view of social kinds such as the one I have presented here. If it is up to us to come up with the categories, we can construct them in the way we think best, even from a moral and political perspective. Importantly, constructivism is then amenable to conceptual engineering; a fast-growing and promising branch of philosophy that focuses on how to assess and modify our conceptual schemes.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ See Chalmers 2020 and Isaac 2021.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a few words to summarize what I have achieved in this dissertation and some goals to direct future research. I began with refuting existing accounts of what it means to be social, and argued that we only need an intuitive account of what counts as social. I then listed four questions to be asked if we want to give an account of social kinds: the semantic question (asking how to define ‘social kind’), the ontological question (asking if social kinds exist), the constitutive question (asking what social kinds are made of), and the origin question (asking where social kinds come from). I answered the semantic question by stating that social kinds are partitions of entities that bear and share social properties. This definition allowed me to distinguish social kinds from social groups and from social objects. This latter distinction allowed me to argue against a popular view in social ontology, according to which at least some social kinds are such that they exist independently of our thoughts being directed towards them. I called this view ‘Natural Boundaries Realism’ (NBR) and I distinguished from ontological realism about social kinds, holding that they exist, a view that I defended, thereby answering the ontological question. I showed how the main argument in favor of NBR is that social kinds, such as *economic recession* and *racism*, exist and are what they are independently of what we think of them. I argued that the argument fails because it misses the distinction drawn in the previous chapter between social kinds and their instances. NBR manages to show at best that some social objects’ existence and nature are independent of our thoughts being directed towards them, but not that the kinds themselves are like that too. Moreover, the vagueness characterizing the boundaries of social kinds poses a dilemma for NBR, as it must accept this vagueness as either ontic or epistemic, and both options are problematic. The failure of NBR gives us

reasons to uphold the opposite view, that of anti-realism or constructivism regarding social kinds, according to which, social kinds have their boundaries artificially imposed by us. I explored this view by answering the two remaining questions about social kinds: the constitutive and origin question. I answered the constitutive question by arguing that social kinds are concepts. I defended this as a view that better accommodates what we know about social kinds and that, unlike NBR, does not incur the same problem of vagueness. I then answered the origin question by arguing for what I called a 'well-tempered pluralism,' where social kinds are either intentionally constructed, such as *Member of the European Parliament*, or emergent, such as *hipster*. After their inception, intentionally constructed kinds may later acquire emergent kinds, such as *taxpayer*, and emergent kinds may later acquire intentionally constructed properties, such as *unemployed*. After replying to possible objections to well-tempered pluralism, I moved on to consider the relationship between social kinds and natural kinds. Since causal theories of natural kinds cannot accommodate the existence of social kinds such as legal kinds and linguistic kinds - whose properties are not causally related but still allow induction - I endorsed the Stable Property Cluster account. Finally, I explored the relationship between moral and social values, and social kinds. I showed how values play a role either by being associated with the properties of the kind or by guiding the drawing of the boundaries of the kind, and argued that, unlike NBR, my anti-realist account can accommodate these normative inputs.

Social kinds guide our behavior by informing us about social reality, and they are the objects and tools of scientific investigation. Thus, I believe my constructive theory enhances our understanding of the nature of the social world as well as the workings of the social sciences. However, with the help of other sciences there is more that needs to

be said about social kinds. Given that social kinds are concepts, we need help understanding them with the assistance of cognitive science and social psychology. A question that we touched upon but did not tackle is about the identity criteria for social kinds: what kinds of change does a social kind have to go through to say that it has changed into another concept? Another issue that has been briefly mentioned is the question of balancing description-driven and prescription-driven investigations into social kinds, and what to do in case these aims conflict? This is a question that concerns conceptual engineering, ethics, and the philosophy of the social sciences, and one which opens up avenues for further research on social kinds.

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