**Is Being Non-Binary a Social Kind?**

Miroslav Imbrišević/The Open University/UK

miroslav.imbrisevic@open.ac.uk

Philosophers distinguish between natural kinds (e.g. tiger, rip tide, vulcano) and social kinds (e.g. money, marriage, age of majority). We have little control over the former (except for classifying them); we simply encounter them (in nature). Social kinds, on the other hand, are constructed by us. We made up the kind ‘age of majority’ (you will not find it in nature) and we can, for example, change the age of majority from 21 to 18, we have control over it. But we can’t change the roar of a tiger, or to make it sound like a pussy-cat. In contrast, we have changed the social kind ‘marriage’ to include same-sex couples.

Robin Dembroff (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26927949>) believes that ‘non-binary’ is a social kind. I have my doubts about this, but if it is a social kind, then it is a very special one. Take the social kind ‘philosopher’. Some people might find the membership conditions ‘oppressive’: e.g. those who see themselves as ‘philosophers of life’; self-identified philosophers; autodidacts; those who didn’t finish their PhD; some who study esoteric subjects – and, of course, all kinds of crackpots. Among these, there will be people who should count as philosophers (e.g. many of the Phd students who failed to finish will be able philosopher, and so will many autodidacts). Some of them may consider the membership conditions to be oppressive, some (of the failed PhD students) may actually approve of them. But teaching philosophy, having a doctorate in philosophy[[1]](#endnote-1) or having published in philosophy are pragmatic, rather than infallible, guides to who should count as a philosopher.

Some social kinds are ‘anchored’ in material reality (‘woman’ is commonly viewed to be anchored to being an adult human female), others, like ‘philosopher’ are anchored in social reality (teaching and publishing in philosophy, and often having a PhD).

Does being non-binary have an anchor? It can only be anchored in a subjective reality: to self-identify as non-binary. Non-binary would then have an ‘internal’ rather than an external anchor. This means that the membership conditions of the social kind ‘non-binary’ are only accessible to non-binary persons. They establish and police their own membership conditions (Dembroff 2018: 36f.): ‘Individuals are granted authority over their gender kind membership.’ So, if this is indeed a ‘social kind’, then it is a highly unusual one.

Perhaps, to distinguish them from social kinds that have an external (or ‘objective’) anchor, we should call non-binary and other such kinds ‘self-posited’ social kinds.[[2]](#endnote-2) Their oddness lies in the fact that the membership conditions for the kind ‘non-binary’ are independent of material or social reality. Others, who inhabit our social world, have no say over these membership conditions. Only non-binary individuals control the membership conditions of this social kind. By analogy, it would be like stipulating that only those who are married control the membership conditions of the social kind ‘marriage’. But in reality, all members of the social world can influence the membership conditions of the social kind ‘marriage’; bachelors and widows are included. So, ‘non-binary’ and other such social kinds are *sui generis* – and deeply undemocratic. With regard to all other social kinds (ideally) all members of the social world can have a say about a) classification and b) about widening or narrowing the membership conditions. Note that in this respect non-binary bears a similarity to natural kinds: all those who aren’t non-binary simply encounter the social kind ‘non-binary’ - in our shared social world, just like they encounter a tiger.

One wonders: is it useful to have self-positing social kinds within a social world? My worry is this: without an external anchor, anything goes.

1. Having a PhD is a recent requirement. There are still people teaching at Oxford who never studied for a PhD). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This reminds me of Fichte’s Tathandlung: ‘Das Ich setzt sich selbst.’ (The I posits itself). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)