Social Construction and Indeterminacy

# 1. Introduction

There are many examples of indeterminacy. The paradigm cases involve vagueness. Rhonda is wearing a blueish-green shirt, and it is indeterminate whether the shirt is blue. Pete is borderline-bald. And so on. These examples of indeterminacy are familiar. The real question is: how should indeterminacy be understood?

An increasing number of philosophers argue that indeterminacy is *metaphysical* (or worldly) in the sense that indeterminacy has its source in the world itself (rather than how the world is represented or known). The standard arguments for metaphysical indeterminacy have two features: (*i*) they concern the metaphysics of items of disparate ontological categories, like heaps, colors, and tallness; (*ii*) they are centered around the sorites paradox.

The goal of this paper is to present a new argument for the existence of metaphysical indeterminacy. I cash out an intriguing suggestion by Parsons (2000, 11), who writes:

Suppose that some form of idealism is correct, so that the world is a thing created by our minds. Then since our minds are finite, they are not likely to get around to finishing the job. So some aspects of the world will be left uncreated, or undetermined, and there will be indeterminacy.

The suggestion is that, if our minds create the world, then the world is likely to contain some indeterminacy. Why? Because our minds, being limited in the way they are, are unlikely to settle every state of affairs. We have vague and indeterminate judgments, and the resulting indeterminacy will be reflected in the world itself. Metaphorically put: if we were responsible for writing the book of the world, the book would contain missing sentences!

While idealism is out of the question, there are similar possibilities in which indeterminacy arises as a consequence of agents. My argument goes like this. Suppose that social constructionism is correct and therefore some social facts are settled by our judgments—*viz.,* our collective or individuals beliefs, perceptions, agreements, attitudes, etc. Due to the indeterminacy of our judgments, we are unlikely to make the social facts completely determinate. So some aspects of the social world will be indeterminate.

I will proceed as follows. First, I characterize *constructional indeterminacy*—the kind of indeterminacy generated by social construction (§[2](#ind)). Second, I argue that constructional indeterminacy is (at least sometimes) metaphysical indeterminacy (§[3](#argument)). Lastly, I argue against the view that constructional indeterminacy is always semantic or epistemic (§[4](#objections)).

# 2. Indeterminacy

In this section, I clarify what I mean by metaphysical, social, and constructional indeterminacy.

## 2.1. Metaphysical Indeterminacy

Indeterminacy is a worldly (or metaphysical) matter just in case indeterminacy is not due to our language or ignorance; rather, indeterminacy is substantive feature of the world. There are various accounts of metaphysical indeterminacy.[[1]](#footnote-1) I specifically conceive of indeterminacy as worldly unsettledness (á la Barnes and Williams (2011)). For it to be indeterminate whether is for the states of affairs represented by to be unsettled.

Nothing in this paper hinges on the details of a particular account of metaphysical indeterminacy. Nor do I assume that the existence of metaphysical indeterminacy rules out the existence of semantic or epistemic indeterminacy. My arguments *do* crucially depend on the assumption that metaphysical indeterminacy is intelligible. I will not defend my view against general worries about the intelligibility of metaphysical indeterminacy.

Now, even if indeterminacy is worldly, there remain questions about the logic of indeterminacy. There are lively debates about whether, or the extent to which, indeterminacy requires us to reject principles of classical logic. I do not think the choice of logic is crucial to the claims of this paper. I will assume that a sentence or proposition can be determinately true, determinately false, or indeterminate, but I will not identify truth/falsity with determinate truth/falsity.

Lastly, I will sometimes say “ is indeterminate” as opposed to “It is indeterminate whether .” This is for the sake of readability. I do not intend to suggest that indeterminacy is a property of a sentence or fact as opposed to whether that sentence or fact holds.

## 2.2. Social Indeterminacy

We now have a sense of what it takes for indeterminacy to be metaphysical. Before arguing that social indeterminacy is metaphysical, however, I must clarify what I mean by social indeterminacy.

There are various notions of indeterminacy, but I will focus on *vagueness*—the kind of indeterminacy found in sorites paradoxes.[[2]](#footnote-2) For example, consider McKitrick (2015, 2581)’s *dispositionalist* definition of gender.

x is gender G iff x has (sufficiently many, sufficiently strong) dispositions D…D to behave in ways B…B in situations S…S, and [the] relevant social group considers behaving in ways B…B in situations S…S to be G.

We do not have to go far into the definition before we encounter sources of vagueness. What counts as sufficiently many dispositions? What counts as sufficiently strong dispositions? It may be indeterminate whether someone has a gender because it is indeterminate whether they have sufficiently many or sufficiently strong dispositions.

There are other, less obvious examples of vagueness in the social world. Consider Jeffers (2013)’s *cultural constructionist* view of race. On this view, races are cultural groups; being a member of a race is primarily a matter of “participation in distinctive ways of life” (Glasgow et al. 2019, 50). Jeffers traces this view to DuBois (1996, 40), who defines a race as:

a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.

This definition describes a number of different dimensions to racial identity, but we can imagine each dimension being a matter of degree. Sharing traditions, for example, is a matter of degree. I may share one tradition or I may share many traditions. But it may be indeterminate whether I share *enough* traditions to count as a member of a certain race. A similar story can be told about sharing a history, language, way of life, etc.

It is easy to find examples of vagueness in the social world. It may be vague whether …

* …one is a member of a social identity group (like race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or ability).
* …a group at one time is the same as a group at a later time.
* …the law applies in a particular circumstance.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In each case, we find some criterion that admits of degrees and tweak it until we are convinced that there is indeterminacy with respect to whether an individual satisfies it.

The considerations that motivate social vagueness, here, are not necessarily different in kind than the ones that motivate indeterminacy, in general. We might define social indeterminacy as follows. Say that a sentence is *socially indeterminate* just in case it is indeterminate whether , where has a social subject matter (or propositional content).

I assume we have a basic grasp of what is, and what is not, social. Cities, groups, institutions, and laws are social, while atoms, rocks, time, and numbers are not. There will be borderline cases of the social, as well as social accounts of the ostensibly non-social, but we are competent enough with the concept *social* to understand the broad notion of social indeterminacy.

## 2.3. Constructional Indeterminacy

Social indeterminacy, as described, does not interestingly differ from non-social indeterminacy. Social indeterminacy becomes interesting when we consider what happens when social indeterminacy intersects with social construction.

The basic idea of social construction is that social agents, groups, or structures are the reason why some truth or fact holds.[[4]](#footnote-4) There are various accounts of social construction, but I take the minimum commitment to be that there are true sentences of the form is because is , where has a social subject matter. For example, landlords exist because of a complex social structure built around the notion of private property, the rights associated with that property, and so on.

The relevant sense of “because” is metaphysical or constitutive dependence. The social structure does not merely cause you to become a landlord, it is what metaphysically makes you a landlord. Haslanger (2012, 87) calls this *constitutive social construction*, where “[something] is constitutively constructed iff in defining it we must make reference to social factors.” There are different accounts of constitutive social construction, but I will think of it broadly in terms of a real definition. The real definition of a thing tells us what that thing is. Real definitions are not nominal, or semantic definitions. There are different theories of real definition, but I will assume that: if is defined by , then (*i*) holds because of (rather than vice versa) and (*ii*) and hold in all the same possibilities.[[5]](#footnote-5) So for to be constitutively socially constructed by is for to be a social definition of .

Given this notion of social construction, we can see that the McKitrick (2015)’s account of gender and Jeffers (2013)’s account of race are accounts on which gender and race are socially constructed. McKitrick (2015) uses a biconditional to characterize gender, but it is natural to take there to be an explanatory asymmetry between the left and right sides of the biconditional. A dispositionalist account of gender says that a person has the gender they do *because* of the way their dispositions are interpreted, not vice versa. Similarly, the cultural constructionist about race takes a person’s race to be explained by their culture; their culture is not explained by their race.

Now let us consider what happens when we have cases of social indeterminacy. Suppose that a person is racially Black in virtue of participation in the -culture—the culture that makes one Black, whatever it is. But further suppose that there is a case in which it is indeterminate whether someone is a member of the -culture. Given the prominence of cultural mixing, there will likely be a case where a person is a borderline member of the -culture. In such a case, what do we say about that individual’s race? To me, the most natural conclusion is that it is indeterminate whether is Black.

Here is the argument. Let be the expression that designates the relevant condition—being a member of the -culture—characterizing the membership conditions for being Black.

Inheritance

1. An individual is Black in virtue of satisfying .
2. It is indeterminate whether satisfies .
3. If an individual is Black in virtue of satisfying , and it is indeterminate whether satisfies , then it is indeterminate whether is Black.
4. Therefore, it is indeterminate whether is Black.

Premise 1 is a generic explanation of what makes an individual Black, one that makes a crucial reference to social factors; this premise reflects the basic idea of social construction. Also, Premise 1 entails: necessarily, for every , is Black just in case satisfies . Premise 2 represents the idea that there will be indeterminacy in whether a person will be part of the -culture. Finally, Premise 3 represents a natural explanatory connection principle. If you define in terms of , and there is indeterminacy in the definition of , then that indeterminacy should also be found in the definition of .

Inheritance tells us that the indeterminacy of what is socially constructed will be inherited from the condition used to define it. If it is not indeterminate whether is Black, then either is determinately Black or is determinately non-Black. It seems that cannot be determinately Black because, if they were, they would determinately satisfy ; after all, satisfying is what makes one Black. It also seems that cannot be determinately non-Black because, if they were, they would determinately not satisfy . So it must be indeterminate whether is Black. Furthermore, it is indeterminate whether is Black *because* it is indeterminate whether satisfies . The indeterminacy of whether is Black is not a scattered logical consequence; it is explained by the indeterminacy of whether satisfies .

As stated, the interpretation of Inheritance is underspecified. Whether the argument is sound depends on what we take indeterminacy to be in the premises and conclusion. In the next section, I will argue for a specific interpretation of Inheritance. But for now, my claim is that there is *some* relevant interpretation of indeterminacy on which Inheritance is sound. The argument is intuitively compelling. The question is how, exactly, to interpret it.

Even in its underdetermined formulation, Inheritance is interesting because it suggests that social indeterminacy can be inherited by the underlying indeterminacy of the judgments of a group or individual. I call this *constructional indeterminacy*. Social indeterminacy, in such cases, is a direct consequence of the indeterminacy of social construction (or the judgments underwriting it). Here is a more precise statement of the idea. Say that a sentence is *constructionally indeterminate* just in case (*i*) is socially indeterminate and (*ii*) there exists a socially indeterminate such that: is indeterminate because is indeterminate.

Given my definition of constructional indeterminacy, it should be clear that every constructionally indeterminate sentence is a socially indeterminate one. But is every socially indeterminate sentence a constructionally indeterminate one? Not necessarily. For example, suppose you believe in indeterminate identity. Then there will likely be cases where it is indeterminate whether some social object is identical to another, where this holds because of considerations around indeterminate identity, not social construction. Or suppose you believe (*a*) that the social is fully explained by the non-social and (*b*) that some of the most fundamental social sentences are socially indeterminate. Then it follows that those sentences cannot be constructionally indeterminate because they are socially indeterminate for (immediately) non-social reasons.

I have identified the phenomenon of constructional indeterminacy and distinguished it from social indeterminacy. I should note that there are non-social parallels of constructional indeterminacy. In fact, you could think of constructional indeterminacy as a special case of explanations of the form: is indeterminate because is indeterminate. I focus on the social case because the social world is “up to us” in a way that the non-social world is not; we can determine what makes someone a citizen, but we cannot determine what makes something an atom.[[6]](#footnote-6) Or at least, the sense in which the social world is up to us is much less contentious.[[7]](#footnote-7)

# 3. Constructional Indeterminacy is Metaphysical Indeterminacy

I claim that at least some cases of constructional indeterminacy are instances of metaphysical indeterminacy. Specifically, I will argue that groups have membership conditions that are determined by our judgments, where the indeterminacy of our judgments leads to indeterminacy in the membership conditions of the groups themselves.

## 3.1. Social Groups

My paradigm cases of constructional indeterminacy involve social groups. There are many examples of social groups: teams, committees, races, genders, clubs, the Supreme Court, etc. I make two assumptions about groups.

First assumption: groups have membership conditions. In order to be a member of the United States Supreme Court, you have to be nominated by the President and then the Supreme Court must confirm your nomination by a simple majority vote. Insofar as races are socially constructed, there are certain criteria that must be met in order to qualify as, and suffice as, a member of a racial group; for the cultural constructionist, in particular, you have to be part of a certain culture. More formally, I assume that if is a social group, then there are conditions which specify under what circumstances an individual is a . It may be a matter of debate about what these membership conditions look like, exactly. They could be necessary and sufficient conditions. Or they could be a cluster of conditions, no fixed set of which are necessary and sufficient for group membership.[[8]](#footnote-8) In either case, I assume that social groups have membership conditions, an assumption that is fairly popular in the metaphysics of social groups.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Second assumption: for some social groups, the membership conditions of those groups are (primarily) determined by the intentions, judgments, thoughts, or agreements of humans. Going forward, I will use “judgment” as a catch-all for these various mentalistic states and attitudes. This second assumption is widely endorsed in the social ontology literature.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Consider the Supreme Court’s membership conditions. Those conditions are what they are, in part, because some people judged that they should be what they are. The actual membership conditions of the Supreme Court were not forced upon us by nature; some people, at some point in time, could have instituted different membership conditions. As it stands, being a member of the Supreme Court does not require one to be a US citizen, but we can easily imagine a world in which it did. In such a world, some people would have made different decisions about the membership conditions of the Supreme Court.

In the actual world, the process by which membership conditions are determined can be quite complex. However, the basic structure of the process can be described via simple thought experiments. Ritchie (2013, 260) writes:

Suppose that President Obama decides to create a committee composed of the Chief Justice, the Majority and Minority Leaders of the House of Representatives, and the Majority and Minority Leaders of the Senate. Obama intends for these five individuals to form a new committee. Since the individual who is Chief Justice and the individual who is the Majority Leader of the House and so on have joined (through their intentions) groups which are part of a government that recognizes that President Obama has the power to form committees, one might hold that the new committee is formed through Obama’s intention.

The membership conditions for the new committee is specified by , where satisfies just in case: either is a Majority Leader, is Minority Leader, and so on. These membership conditions are determined by Obama and the relevant background conditions, where the background conditions consist in Obama having the relevant power to determine the membership conditions. Notice that the membership conditions may be determined by Obama even though they do not reference him.

To conclude, I should make a few caveats about my assumption that groups sometimes determine membership conditions. First: membership conditions are not necessarily created solely by our judgments; some background conditions may not involve our judgments. Second: the creation of membership conditions does not necessarily require that new *objects* are created (á la Thomasson (2019)). I only assume that humans create or revise membership conditions via their judgments, an assumption that is cashed out in different ways by different social metaphysicians.

## 3.2. The Argument

Recall Inheritance.

Inheritance

1. An individual is Black in virtue of satisfying .
2. It is indeterminate whether satisfies .
3. If an individual is Black in virtue of satisfying , and it is indeterminate whether satisfies , then it is indeterminate whether is Black.
4. Therefore, it is indeterminate whether is Black.

The earlier thought was that Inheritance was compelling on some interpretation of indeterminacy. But now we have to answer the question: what is the relevant interpretation of indeterminacy? I will argue that that we should interpret Premise [[o2]](#o2) in terms of semantic indeterminacy, Premise [[con]](#con) as a principle connecting semantic and metaphysical indeterminacy, and Conclusion [[o3]](#o3) in terms of metaphysical indeterminacy. In short, we can derive metaphysical indeterminacy from the existence of semantic indeterminacy plus constitutive social construction.

Here is the precise argument (or argument schema) I want to defend.

Metaphysical Inheritance

1. It is metaphysically determinate that an individual is Black in virtue of satisfying .
2. It is semantically indeterminate whether satisfies .
3. If 1 and 2, then 4.
4. Therefore, it is metaphysically indeterminate whether is Black.

I will walk through the argument, step by step.

Start with Premise 1. This holds because we assume there is a social group that has metaphysically determined the membership conditions for being Black. If the defining condition is , then some group has metaphysically defined *Black* in terms of satisfying . There is now a real definition between the properties *Black* and satisfying . A real definition entails two conditions. The first is explanatory. If *Black* is defined in terms of satisfying , there is an explanatory asymmetry between *Black* and satisfying . Satisfying makes someone *Black*, not the other way around. The second condition is modal: if *Black* is defined in terms of satisfying , then necessarily: for any individual, *x* is *Black* if and only if *x* satisfies . I take the notion of necessity to be metaphysical, although I will later show that versions of this argument hold even if we weaken the notion of necessity.

Now move on to Premise 2. This premise seems plausible because it is plausible that those who determine the membership conditions of racial categories will have vague or otherwise indeterminate judgments about whether has the cultural identity that is characteristic of being Black. The epistemicist will obviously reject this premise, but I deal with them in §[4.2](#epistemic).

Premise 3 is a principle that bridges semantic and metaphysical indeterminacy. To assess its plausibility, let us consider what happens when Conclusion 4—the consequent of Premise 3—is false. There are now only two possibilities: either it is metaphysically determinate that is Black or it is metaphysically determinate that is not Black.

Consider the first disjunct: it is metaphysically determinate that is Black. Further suppose that Premise 1 is true. We know that Premise 1, being a real definition, entails that it is metaphysically necessary that: is Black just in case satisfies . Since we have assumed that it is metaphysically determinate that is Black, and Premise 1 implies that being Black and satisfying necessarily co-vary, it appears to follow that it is semantically determinate that satisfies . Remember: and *Black* are true of at all the same possibilities. So it seems incoherent to think that it is metaphysically determinate whether is Black yet does not determinately satisfy . More precisely, if it is metaphysically determinate that satisfies , then it seems to follow that it is semantically determinate that satisfies ; satisfaction is an inherently semantic notion, after all. I see no way out of the consequence that it is semantically determinate that satisfies , but this conclusion, of course, conflicts with Premise 2.

Consider the second disjunct: it is metaphysically determinate that is not Black. Using similar reasoning as in the first case, we should conclude that determinately fails to satisfy . Being black and satisfying co-vary, so if you do not have one property then you do not have the other. But Premise 2 tells us that it is semantically indeterminate whether satisfies , so we have a contradiction.

Putting it all together: if Conclusion 4 is false and Premise 1 is true, then Premise 2 must be false. We know this because we have canvassed the two ways that Premise 4 could be false while Premise 1 is true and found both of them to rule out the truth of Premise 2. But if it is impossible for Premises 1 and 2 to be true and Conclusion 4 false, then Premise 3 holds. And of course, if all three premises are true, then Conclusion 4 holds via *modus ponens*.

The intuition behind the validity of Metaphysical Inheritance is as follows. If membership conditions are determined by our judgments, the resulting membership conditions should be faithful to our judgments. If we collectively decide (under the right conditions) that being a member of the Philosophy Club requires having taken at least one philosophy class, we should expect that, in fact, being member of the Philosophy Club requires having taken at least one philosophy class. Similarly, if there is indeterminacy in our judgments—concerning, say, what counts as a philosophy class—then the resulting membership conditions should reflect this indeterminacy.

That said, I do not think that membership conditions are always faithful to our judgments. For example, our judgments may involve contradictions but we may not believe in contradictions in reality. Or our judgments could be too indeterminate and thereby fail to determine membership conditions. My claim is merely that, other things being equal, if membership conditions are determined by our judgments, they should reflect those judgments, indeterminacy and all.

Before considering objections to Metaphysical Inheritance, I should note a wrinkle involving modality. It is intuitive to think that a group could have defined a socially constructed property in a different way than it actually did. However, given standard assumptions about modality, real definitions do not vary from world to world; *Black* cannot be defined by in some worlds and defined by in others. There are two broad ways to deal with this issue. Either we adopt a two-dimensional theory of modality or we appeal to restricted forms of metaphysical necessity. I will briefly discuss both approaches.

I start with the two-dimensional approach. Let be the proposition: for every , is Black just in case satisfies . Instead of saying that is metaphysically necessary, you can say that is necessary relative to , where is a set of facts about how the membership conditions of *Black* are decided. Alternatively, we could think of as a group and think of necessary relative to as: necessary from ’s perspective. You can then say that it is not absolutely necessary that is true, because there is another way of constructing the world, say , in which does not hold. So implications of real definitions, like , are necessary relative to but not . This approach is two-dimensional because it commits you to two different types of modality.[[11]](#footnote-11) The two-dimensional theory has its virtues, but it requires us to jettison the traditional, one-dimensional conception of modality.

A less radical approach would be to appeal to a restricted form of metaphysical necessity. Instead of saying that is metaphysically necessary, you can say that is necessary relative to , where is a set of possible worlds in which is true throughout. can be necessary relative to but absolutely metaphysically contingent. So we can capture the sense in which people could have socially constructed the world differently. If we rewrite Metaphysical Inheritance with a restricted form of necessity in mind, indexing each step to a world or set worlds, then a version of the argument still works. The key is that holds in some worlds, and it is semantically indeterminate whether satisfies in one of those worlds.

In either case, we have an argument in which we derive metaphysical indeterminacy from semantic indeterminacy.

# 4. Objections

I have argued that at least some instances of constructional indeterminacy are metaphysical. Now, I want to consider two obvious alternatives to the metaphysical account.

## 4.1. Constructional Indeterminacy is Semantic

You may think that constructional indeterminacy is semantic indeterminacy, and that we should account for Inheritance in the same way we account for other cases where we have sentences with vague expressions.

Suppose we adopt a simple supervaluationist semantics. Then a sentence is determinately true/false if it is true/false on every sharpening of its meaning. A sentence is indeterminate otherwise. Let us also suppose that our language contains a way of talking about determinacy and indeterminacy. Now consider the following interpretation of Inheritance.

Semantic Inheritance

1. It is semantically determinate that: necessarily, is Black just in case satisfies .
2. It is semantically indeterminate whether satisfies .
3. If 1 and 2, then 4.
4. Therefore, it is semantically indeterminate whether is Black.

Premise 1 tells us that sharpenings of “Black” and classify individuals in the same ways. Premise 2 says there are some sharpenings of in which is and other sharpenings of in which is not . But if sharpenings of “Black” and classify individuals in the same ways, we should expect them to fail to determinate classify individuals in the same ways. So if one fails to determinately classify , then the other should, as well; this is Premise 3. Conclusion 4 follows.

Notice that Semantic Inheritance turns out valid without any appeal to metaphysical indeterminacy. As such, you may think it is a plausible alternative interpretation of Inheritance. The problem, however, is that Semantic Indeterminacy fails to adequately represent the explanatory dependence involved in the original argument. We want to say that someone is Black *in virtue of* satisfying , where this implies some kind of asymmetric dependence. How does the semanticist account for this notion of dependence?

The semanticist cannot simply appeal to the idea that people simply use “Black” and to refer to the same things. This is a purely nominal definition, and nominal definitions do not entail the relevant sort of explanatory dependence relations. Now, one might argue that, despite appearances, there are no metaphysically robust dependence relations in these cases. However, there is no clear principled reason to reject the existence of such relations. If explanatory dependence relations hold in the non-social case, we have reason to believe they also hold in the social case.

The trouble with the semantic view concerns what it says about constitutive social construction. Social metaphysicians assume there is a relation of metaphysical dependence between human judgments and the membership conditions of groups. This means that social facts, properties, or objects depend on judgments. However, the semantic theory does not clearly represent this idea, as it mainly accounts for dependencies between truths. But saying that *Black* depends on the judgment is not the same as saying that the truth of “ is Black” depends on the truth of “ satisfies .”

At least some social metaphysicians want to say that *facts* about Blackness depend on a judgment . The question is: what happens if that judgment fails to determinately apply (or not apply) to a case? My answer is simple: it is indeterminate whether the fact obtains. The semantic theorist disagrees with this assessment. So either they rule out the possibility of membership conditions being determined by us, or they rule out the possibility that we can determine vague membership conditions.

If you rule out the possibility of membership conditions being determined by us, then you appear to rule out one popular kind of constitutive social construction. Again, social ontologists have sought to make sense of judgment-dependent membership conditions since (Searle 1995)’s landmark account. Perhaps these efforts are misguided, but the argumentative burden is on the semantic theorist to show that constitutive social construction does not exist.

The other possibility is that we do determine membership conditions, but we cannot determine vague membership conditions. For example, you might think that metaphysical indeterminacy does not exist, but we can still determine membership conditions in the cases where our judgments are perfectly precise. We will fail to determine the membership conditions of *Black* if we are not perfectly determinate about what counts as Black.

This view has radical consequences. If vague judgments were unable to determine membership conditions, then there would be few (if any) cases where our judgments determined membership conditions. By the semantic theorists’ own lights, vagueness is a pervasive feature of natural language. For example, Kölbel (2010) writes:

Countless natural language predicates are vague in this [soritical] sense. The vagueness of these predicates does not seem to be an impediment to their usefulness in communication. Similarly, the concepts expressed by vague predicates do not seem to create any problems for our thought. The vagueness of natural language predicates and the concepts they express is therefore not some deficiency, shortfall or malfunction. Vagueness is perfectly normal.

So if membership conditions cannot reflect the vagueness of our judgments, then we must reject the possibility that the membership conditions of social groups are determined by our judgments. And that leads back to the initial horn of our dilemma.

Here is another possibility. Perhaps we can determine membership conditions, but the membership conditions can be perfectly determinate even if our judgments are vague. On this view, the vagueness of our judgments fails to be inherited by the resulting social facts.

The problem with this view is that it is unclear how the membership conditions resolve what would otherwise be indeterminacy. If our judgments leave it indeterminate whether satisfies , and whether is Black depends on whether satisfies , then what makes it so that is determinately Black or determinately non-Black? There is no obvious answer to this question.[[12]](#footnote-12) Furthermore, this view renders Semantic Inheritance invalid. In doing so, it undoes the few benefits that the semantic view offered in the first place.

In summary: the semantic view can account for certain kinds of talk about the social world, but if constitutive social construction exists, it cannot account for some instances of constructional indeterminacy.

## 4.2. Constructional Indeterminacy is Epistemic

So far, I have assumed that judgments like are semantically indeterminate. But you may reject that assumption, instead arguing that indeterminacy is epistemic.

Epistemicism is the view that indeterminacy (or at least vagueness) stems from our ignorance of the world, rather than metaphysical or semantic indeterminacy. The epistemicist is committed to the existence of sharp-cut off lines between say, being determinately Black and being determinately non-Black. The thought is that there are special obstacles to knowing the truth about borderline cases.

The details of epistemicist accounts vary, but the consensus view is that we are ignorant about borderline cases due to a combination of (*a*) a *safety* condition on knowledge and (*b*) *semantic plasticity*, or the slight differences between the meanings of vague expressions in counterfactual circumstances.[[13]](#footnote-13) Williamson (1997, 947–48) explains:

Although someone may judge truly ‘Baldness is the property of having fewer than 3,832 hairs on one’s scalp’, the judgment does not express knowledge, for whatever produced a judgment in those words could very easily have done so even if the overall use of ’bald’ had been very slightly shifted (as it could very easily have been) in such a way that it referred to the property of having fewer than 3,831 hairs on one’s scalp, in which case words would have been.

We can make a true judgment about the cut-off line for being bald, however our judgment will not be knowledge because we would make the same judgment if the meaning of “bald” were to shift slightly. Because we (humans) are insensitive to the differences in such slight meaning shifts, it follows that we will be unable to know the truth of specific claims about the cut-off line for vague expressions as well as their borderline cases.

Epistemicism uses the same logical resources as the semantic supervaluationist. We give the determinacy and indeterminacy operators an epistemic interpretation. Say that is determinately true/false just in case there is no barrier to knowing that . And we say that is indeterminate just in case is neither determinately true nor determinately false. From the perspective of supervaluationist semantics, we effectively replace semantic possibility with epistemic possibility.

As a consequence, the epistemicist theory makes the same logical predictions as the semantic theory.[[14]](#footnote-14) So Inheritance is a valid argument, but it should be understood as the inheritance of epistemic indeterminacy, not semantic or metaphysical indeterminacy. And we can understand the explanatory dependence involved as follows: there is an epistemic barrier to knowing whether is Black because there is an epistemic barrier to knowing whether satisfies .

The epistemicist fares slightly better than the semantic theorist when it comes to constitutive social construction. Suppose that vague judgments, like , constitute the worldly membership conditions of some social group, like *Black*. What happens if it is indeterminate whether satisfies ? The epistemicist says there is a fact of the matter about whether is Black but we cannot know whether is, or is not, Black.

Epistemicism skirts metaphysical indeterminacy because it says that the indeterminacy of our judgments is not strictly part of their semantic content. However, constructional indeterminacy can exist even if the semantic content of our judgments is precise. For example, suppose that whether Kate is a woman fully depends on whether it is (epistemically) determinate that Kate acts womanly. Say that is a woman just in case it is determinate that: acts womanly. And say that is a non-woman just in case it is determinate that: does not act womanly. So it is determinately true that Kate acts womanly just in case Kate is woman. And it is determinately false that Kate acts womanly just in case Kate is not a woman. Now suppose it is neither determinately true nor determinately false that Kate acts womanly.

The epistemicist will say that it is epistemically indeterminate whether Kate is a woman, which entails there is a settled fact of the matter about whether Kate is a woman. But if Kate is a woman (or not a woman), then it cannot be epistemically indeterminate whether Kate is a woman; remember, we have defined Kate’s being a woman in terms of it being epistemically determinate that she acts womanly. So epistemicism cannot accommodate a definition of *woman* that seems coherent, given its socially constructed nature.

The general problem is that epistemicism cannot account for cases in which social definitions are incompletely specified. The case of Kate is one in which we specify the conditions under which Kate is, and is not, a woman by reference to conditions that are exclusive but not exhaustive.

There are other instances of incomplete social definitions that do not reference determinacy at all. Suppose that a person’s gender is determined by their similarity to paradigm cases. Say that is a woman just in case she has most of the properties of the paradigm woman. And say that is a non-woman just in case she has most of the properties of the paradigm non-woman. It is likely that there will be individuals who have neither most of the properties of the paradigm woman nor most of the properties of the paradigm non-woman. For such individuals, it seems natural to say that it is indeterminate whether they are women. But we cannot say that this indeterminacy is epistemic; there are no epistemic obstacles here.

Of course, the epistemicist will reject the possibility that social facts, objects, or properties can be given purely partial definitions. But I see no obvious argument against this possibility. In mathematics, we define partial functions all the time. Division is undefined when we divide by zero, but this seems perfectly coherent. Sometimes we define the social world in the same way, leaving some cases undefined.

An epistemicist could respond by arguing that there is a distinction between (*a*) an incomplete definition and (*b*) a complete many-valued definition. For example, the definition of division can be seen as fully determinate but many-valued because there are perfectly sharp distinctions between the three states—true, false, and undefined. One might take real vagueness to only exist in cases where there is a lack of sharp boundaries.

To start, it is controversial whether vagueness requires higher-order vagueness.[[15]](#footnote-15) But even if it somehow did, this does not rule out cases of indeterminacy that are due to *open texture* (Waismann 1945)—cases where rules or concepts fail to determinately apply because the rules or concepts were not constructed with certain scenarios in mind. Hart (1961) gives a well-known example of open texture in the law. He imagines a statue that states: no vehicles in the park. Hart (1961, 126) writes:

There will …be plain cases constantly recurring in similar contexts to which general expressions are clearly applicable (‘If anything is a vehicle a motor-car is one’) but there will also be cases where it is not clear whether they apply or not. (‘Does “vehicle” used here include bicycles, airplanes, roller skates?’)

Note that the indeterminacy of the statue is not a matter of degree. Rather, the statue simply leaves open whether or not some things count as vehicles (for the purposes of the statute).

Similarly, our judgments about the membership conditions of *woman* could leave open whether certain individuals are women. The membership conditions of *woman* may not make determinate verdicts about a social world that has very different gender norms than the actual one. In such cases, we get gender indeterminacy, not because of vagueness, but because of the open texture of our judgments.

The epistemicist is free to object to the existence of open texture, but it is important to note that the standard arguments for epistemicism depend on considerations of vagueness, not open texture. Furthermore, there is no clear way to extend epistemicist arguments to the subject of open texture.

The moral of the story is that we can generate metaphysical indeterminacy from our judgments even if those judgments are not vague. In the case of partial definitions, our judgments are fully determinate but constitute an incomplete definition. In the case of open texture, our judgments are indeterminate without being vague. To generate metaphysical indeterminacy, we only need the membership conditions to reflect, in some way, a distinction between determinate membership, determinate non-membership, and lacking determinate membership.

# 5. Conclusion

I have argued that constructional indeterminacy, the kind of indeterminacy resulting from constitutive social construction, is sometimes metaphysical indeterminacy. I will end by clarifying the consequences of my view.

My view entails the existence of *derivative indeterminacy*—metaphysical indeterminacy that is fully dependent on determinate facts.[[16]](#footnote-16) My argument proceeds from determinate facts about our judgments to indeterminacy in the social world. I do not rule out the possibility that the fundamental level is completely determinate.

Supposing constructional indeterminacy *is* metaphysical, what explanatory work does this thesis do for social metaphysicians? This is the subject of a future paper, but I will end by sketching the big picture.

The social world is shot through with cases where we want to say: there is *no fact of the matter* about whether an individual has a given social property or status. We also have a ready explanation for this absence of fact. We want to say: there is no fact of the matter because the socially constructed facts are up to us. If we take constructional indeterminacy to be metaphysical, we have a simple, yet coherent, way of explaining the appearances. For some social facts, there is no fact of the matter (in the sense of metaphysical indeterminacy) about whether they hold because what makes them hold is up to us (in the sense of constitutive social construction).

# Acknowledgments

Thanks to the audience at the 2020 Social Metaphysics Workshop for their feedback on an earlier version of this paper. Specifically, I’d like to thank Asya Passinsky, Dee Payton, Mike Raven, Matthew Andler, Rebecca Mason, Aaron Griffith, and Katherine Jenkins. This paper also greatly benefited from discussions with Elizabeth Barnes.

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1. Parsons (2000; Hawley 2002; Morreau 2002; Akiba 2004; Rosen and Smith 2004; Williams 2008; Barnes and Williams 2011; Wilson 2013, 2016; Taylor and Burgess 2015; Darby and Pickup 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Williamson (1994; Keefe 2000; Sorensen 2001; Shapiro 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Endicott (2000; Asgeirsson 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hacking (1999; Mallon 2007; Diaz-Leon 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For literature on real definition (broadly construed), see: Rayo (2013; Rosen 2015; Fine 2015; Dorr 2016; Correia and Skiles 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hacking (1999; Haslanger 2012; Epstein 2015; Mallon 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For comparison, Einheuser (2006) gives an account of how the ostensibly non-social world of mountains and atoms might depend on our conceptual practices. I take this to be an example of the contentious view. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Mallon (2016) for the cluster theory of social kinds. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This assumption is endorsed by (what is sometimes called) structuralist theories of social groups (Ritchie 2013, 2015, 2020; Epstein 2019; Thomasson 2019). Not everyone accepts this view, however. For example, some social ontologists think social groups are concrete material particulars and that they need not satisfy any abstract group roles (Hawley 2017; Horden and López de Sa 2020). Such theorists should reconstruct my claims about group membership as claims about group role satisfaction. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. To make sense of judgment-dependent membership conditions, social ontologists have appealed to collective acceptance or response-dependence (Searle 1995, 2010; Tuomela 2002; Hindriks 2006; Ludwig 2017), grounding and anchoring (Epstein 2015, 2019), conferral (Sveinsdottir 2018), and interactive kinds (Hacking 1999; Khalidi 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Epstein (2015) and Einheuser (2006) for two-dimensional accounts of social construction. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A referee has proposed that one can adopt the naturalness framework—specifically, that of Sider (2011)—and say that the membership conditions are determined by , the most natural perfectly determinate condition in the vicinity of . This is an intriguing proposal, but the problem is that there is no guarantee there will be a single most natural . If there are multiple equally natural conditions in the vicinity of , we get indeterminacy again. See Barnes (2014) for a discussion of indeterminacy within the naturalness framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For discussions of epistemicism and semantic plasticity, see: Williamson (1994; Yli-Vakkuri 2016; Hawthorne 2006; Sennet 2012; Caie 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is a simplification. See Yli-Vakkuri (2016) and Litland and Yli-Vakkuri (2016) for discussions of the epistemic interpretation of supervaluationism as compared with other interpretations. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Shapiro (2006; Wright 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For discussion of derivative indeterminacy, see Barnes (2014), Eva (2018), and Mariani (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)