

Forthcoming in *Metascience* (2017)

The Social Construction of Real Human Kinds

**Ron Mallon. *The Construction of Human Kinds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 250.
\$50.00 HB**

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This book examines naturalistic issues surrounding the social construction of human kinds (or categories). Mallon aims to show how social constructionism can be reconciled with a broadly naturalistic and realist metaphysics. He assumes that socially constructed human categories (e.g., race, gender) are *real and causally predictive*. His analysis intends to explain how this is possible in light of the social constructionist constraint that human categories are constituted by human mental states, theories, and social practices. This argument is innovative insofar as social constructionists are typically antirealists regarding human kinds.

The first part of the book is focused on articulating a “social role” theory of the construction of human categories. The first chapter examines how the social construction of race concepts is *constrained* by naturalistic factors. In particular, human representations (and concepts) of race are constrained by human’s innate tendency (via evolutionary mechanisms) to think about racial groups in an essentialist manner. This counters the thesis that racial essentialism is a recent way of thinking that emerged in Western culture sometime in the nineteenth century. Mallon provides evidence that essentialist thinking about races existed well before this period and that it is the product of a “domain-specific, and species-typical mechanism that manifests itself quite broadly” (p. 42).

In chapter two, Mallon examines three accounts of the social construction of categories, including his favored social role account. Mallon contends that the main task of the constructionist is to explain: (1) how human categories become entrenched after their initial dubbing, and (2) how these categories become *causally significant*, i.e., how categories can be causally predictive and efficacious, such that they yield reliable projectable inferences. Based on

its failure to explain (2), Mallon rejects Clifford Geertz's anthropological view that social scientists should pursue 'thick' descriptions that not only explain human behavior, but the context in which it occurs. Mallon is more sympathetic towards Ian Hacking's 'making up people' project, which suggests that the entrenchment of categories is achieved after a novel description of a category (e.g., 'multiple personality') emerges that provides people with a framework for understanding themselves and their behavior (i.e., an intentional description under which to act). Mallon argues that Hacking's account needs to be supplemented with a more comprehensive account of the factors (e.g., non-intentional mechanisms) involved in category construction.

In chapters two and three, Mallon advances his social role account of the construction of categories. A social role emerges when:

- (1) There is a term (or representation) that individuates a category of persons and is associated with a set of beliefs and evaluations.
- (2) The beliefs and evaluations associated with the representation are common knowledge in the community.

A social role becomes entrenched through the public broadcasting of that role by credible sources (e.g., scientific communities). Mallon suggests that such categories become causally significant when an entrenched social role produces what Richard Boyd calls a homeostatic property cluster (HPC) kind. Members of HPC kinds (e.g., birds) share a cluster of similar properties whose co-occurrence is caused by 'homeostasis': either certain properties favor the presence of others, or there are mechanisms that maintain the properties. Mallon writes: "What is relevant to the ability of the kind to support induction is that there is some stable . . . set of mechanisms that causes properties to cluster in a regular way. . . . [S]ocial roles that do produce and sustain property-cluster kinds may support induction, prediction, and explanation" (p. 92). Mallon's account of how a social role *produces* an HPC kind is somewhat murky. In chapter three, Mallon presents a number of psychological and environmental mechanisms (e.g., innate psychological processes, institutional definitions) intended to clarify this process. While these mechanisms illustrate how social role categories become stabilized and entrenched, it remains unclear how they can *acquire causal efficacy*.

In chapter four, Mallon examines an instance of reduced attribution wherein the more something (e.g., disease, racist attitudes) is represented as natural, the less responsible we regard people for it. This creates a *moral hazard* (i.e., a situation where people have less incentive to avoid a behavior since they are protected from some harmful consequence) that may increase the prevalence of that behavior. Mallon subsequently engages in an interesting discussion about what this might imply normatively for human science representations.

In chapter five, Mallon discusses performance constructionism, which explains human categories as a byproduct of an intentional, strategic *performance* elicited and regulated by our

representations of ourselves. For example, Judith Butler argues that ‘gender’ has no ontological status beyond various acts which constitute its reality; Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that ‘race’ is a matter of us choosing how centrally we identify with a racial identity. These accounts suggest that some putatively natural category is actually the result of intentional activity. Mallon defends a causal (psychological) model of performance constructionism derived from his account of entrenched social roles.

In the latter part of the book, Mallon argues that the social constructionism can be consistent with a minimally realist metaphysics. In chapter six, Mallon defines the “basic realism” he advocates in terms of three commitments:

- (1) Statements of a domain are interpreted literally (rather than metaphorically).
- (2) Statements about a domain are true or approximately true.
- (3) A mind-independent world determines (or constrains) our theories of a domain.

While social constructionists (e.g., Thomas Kuhn, David Bloor) typically reject these realist commitments, Mallon argues that social constructionism need not threaten basic realism. On this central issue, those who do not already share Mallon’s realist sympathies are unlikely to be persuaded.

In chapter seven, Mallon argues—against social constructionists (e.g., Charles Taylor, Ian Hacking)—that basic realism can yield constructed human categories sufficiently *stable* to support attempts at knowledge, prediction, and intervention. Mallon usefully distinguishes among four factors that affect the stability of human categories:

- (1) our epistemic activities converge on truth.
- (2) the social world we are describing changes.
- (3) our epistemic activities cause the world to conform to theories.
- (4) our epistemic activities cause the social world to change in ways that deviate from our theories.

Since there are forces which support both the stability (1, 3) and instability (2, 4) of human categories, Mallon argues that “it is not surprising that we can have knowledge of the world that is real and useful” (p. 173).

In chapter eight, Mallon discusses how his social role account can accommodate the successful *reference* of human categories. Throughout the book, Mallon defends the constructionist stance (viz., “covert category constructionism”) that some human categories (e.g., race, gender, homosexuality) that are believed to be natural kinds are really social kinds. Mallon draws on causal-historical theories of reference advocated by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam to illustrate how such categories can refer to social kinds. With respect to the referents of covert categories, Mallon argues that at the time of their initial dubbing, these terms may refer to nothing, a ‘thin natural kind’ (that is objective but explanatorily weak), or an ‘institutional kind’

(that is brought into existence by its positing), but they subsequently are *regrounded* to refer to a social kind (or social construct).

In the concluding chapter, Mallon discusses his social role theory of covert human categories in relation to alternative approaches. The most obvious view that competes with Mallon's account holds that human categories like race are constituted by natural kinds or biological kinds. Mallon's maintains that this realist account is mistaken about the mechanisms that constitute these kinds. He also rejects skeptical positions that hold that human categories do not exist and nominalist positions that hold that our representations are entirely determined by convention and fail to pick out real distinctions. Mallon suggests that his account can complement social-justice driven metaphysical projects (e.g., Sally Haslanger's view) by illuminating certain normative issues.

Overall, Mallon's book provides an interesting, comprehensive, and well-informed analysis of the social construction of human categories. A great merit of this book is its broad interdisciplinary engagement. Mallon's narrative moves seamlessly through a wide array of fields, including philosophy, cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, and sociology. A drawback of the book is its unclarity on key issues. As indicated above, Mallon's account of how social roles *produce* causally significant categories could be articulated more clearly. Arguably, this matter is better explained by the (more orthodox) realist account that human categories are causally significant *because they*—at least partially—*accurately individuate natural kinds*. Relatedly, some may find Mallon's account to be decidedly antirealist insofar as it privileges the contribution of social factors (i.e., social roles) over naturalistic factors in the determination of human categories. To motivate his analysis further, Mallon requires some account of what *social reality* amounts to, or an examination of how the *interplay* between social and naturalistic factors render some human categories 'real' (p. 213). Despite these complaints, Mallon's book offers a novel and valuable contribution to the literature on human kinds, social constructionism, and the reality of human science classifications. While it may not be the final word on the issues, there is much to learn from and argue with in this book.