Realism and Social Kinds in Conceptual Amelioration

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I outline and defend a limited realism in socio-political conceptual amelioration (RSCA). RSCA claims that, in some cases, socio-political concepts are ameliorated to represent parts of a concept-independent reality more accurately. My main aim is to dissolve a seeming dilemma for RSCA: Whereas social kinds are mind-dependent (i.e. depending on human thought and action), realism implies that the kinds represented are ontologically independent of the concepts representing them. To dissolve this dilemma, I suggest considering two different roles concepts play concerning social kinds. Concepts can both generate social kinds and represent social kinds. Once a concept has generated a social kind, this social kind is part of a concept-independent reality that can be represented by different concepts. Thereby, RSCA allows ameliorated concepts to represent social kinds (e.g., rape, marriage) more accurately while acknowledging that human actions or concepts have generated these social kinds.

Keywords: conceptual amelioration, conceptual engineering, social kinds, realism, social ontology, Neo-Fregeanism

1   Introduction

Concepts structure how we think and behave. For instance, we distinguish objects by whether or not they fall under a given concept. If our concepts are defective (whether epistemically or practically), then our way of making such distinctions will also be defective. We can though—at least sometimes and in principle—improve our thinking and behaviour by ameliorating our concepts. In the past few years, the literature on this topic has immensely grown, mainly under the headings of *conceptual engineering* or (less prominently) *conceptual amelioration.* I prefer and will use the latter term throughout this paper.[1]

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[1]   In the realist cases I am interested in, we wish to say that the post-amelioration concept better represents what x is than the pre-amelioration concept did. 'Amelioration' stresses this aspect of improvement.

I am concerned here with conceptual amelioration in the *socio-political* domain. Here, concepts involved in classifying persons or persons' actions—FAMILY, REFUGEE, HARASSMENT—come to the fore.[2] These concepts, in turn, refer to social kinds: *family, refugee, harassment.* I am interested in *how* the socio-political concepts are related to social kinds as their referents. In particular, can we make sense of the idea that socio-political conceptual amelioration sometimes aims at more accurately representing social kinds?

In answering this question, I start from a realist view of socio-political conceptual amelioration (RSCA). RSCA claims as follows:

(RSCA) Socio-political concepts should sometimes be evaluated and ameliorated according to how accurately they represent social kinds.

Note that my claim is not that representing reality is the only legitimate, or even the primary, aim of evaluating and ameliorating concepts.[3] There are other types of conceptual amelioration. For instance, concepts are said to be evaluated and ameliorated according to "job descriptions" (Fassio and McKenna 2015). In the socio-political domain, this could be called *functional* socio-political conceptual amelioration (FSCA). I leave it open as to (1) whether FSCA is a legitimate type of conceptual amelioration and (2) whether RSCA is a subtype of FSCA.[4]

The main issue for RSCA, which I will address in the remainder, is a seeming tension between realism and social kinds. Namely, realism seems to require that a kind has "natural boundaries; that is, it is not merely a division artificially imposed on the world by human concepts" (Thomasson 2003, 582). This is certainly true for natural kinds. WATER, FISH, and ARTHRITIS do not generate or alter what *water*, *fish*, and *arthritis* are. In contrast, *social kinds* do not exist independently of human activities. Some social kinds may even be generated by our

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[2]   When writing about words or expressions, I shall use scare quotes ('family'). For concepts, I shall use smallcaps (FAMILY). For kinds, I shall use italics (*family*).

[3]   See, however, Simion (2018a, 2018b) for a defence of such claims.

[4]   Representing social reality could be just one of the functions that concepts have (Nado 2021). RSCA is compatible with this possibility, as long as representing reality is accepted to be the *main* function in some instances of conceptual amelioration.

concepts. Consider, for instance, the concept REFUGEE_{NE}, excluding people who have emigrated for economic reasons. Plausibly, REFUGEE_{NE} generates a corresponding social kind *refugee_{NE}*; the kind of people who can be accepted as refugees in a particular society.

The question at hand is whether concepts can be evaluated according to how accurately they represent social kinds when concepts themselves generate social kinds. More precisely, RSCA seems to be threatened by the following *dilemma*. On the one hand, realism is commonly thought to imply (among other things) that the kinds that our concepts refer to have their nature independently from our actions or concepts. For instance, water (a natural kind) seems to be what it is independently of our concepts of water. On the other hand, social kinds are mind-dependent per definition; that is, they depend on human thought and/or action. For instance, the social kind *refugee* seems to exist only if certain human thoughts and/or actions exist (e.g. humans inventing states, borders and policies). Social kinds are not what they are independently of human actions or concepts.

If so, the realist requirement does not seem to be fulfilled in the case of social kinds. The dilemma would be that either we have to give up the claim that social kinds are mind-dependent or give up realism regarding socio-political concepts and kinds. Both options are not viable for RSCA.

In what follows, my aim is to show how this seeming dilemma for RSCA can be dissolved. In a nutshell, this is the solution I will propose: Drawing on *social kind realism*, we can say that social kinds are mind-dependent *and* real. Therefore, social kinds are generated by human actions or concepts *and*—as soon as they exist—are independent in their nature from the concepts used to represent them.

The outline of this paper is as follows.

In section 2, I make explicit some assumptions about the nature of concepts and conceptual amelioration. I characterise concepts as *ways of thinking*, and conceptual amelioration as the attempt to change ways of thinking.

In section 3, I discuss how concepts *generate* social kinds. To do so, I introduce Rebecca Mason's version of social kind realism. According to Mason, social kinds are mind-dependent *and* real.

In section 4, I discuss how concepts *represent* social kinds. I argue that the social kinds represented can be independent of the concepts representing them. Furthermore, I clarify the notion of *representational accuracy* for these cases.

In section 5, I summarise the findings from the previous sections, leading to the distinction between two roles of concepts (kind-*generating* and kind-*representing*). Discussing the RSCA case concerning *rape*, I demonstrate how these two roles work together.

In section 6, I apply the RSCA view to a case study about the social kind *marriage*. According to RSCA, *marriage* can be more-or-less accurately represented by different marriage concepts. This is the case even if *marriage* itself has been conceptually generated.

2 Concepts as ways of thinking

I will reflect on socio-political conceptual amelioration starting from a Neo-Fregean view of concepts.[5] In this section, I will first outline the Neo-Fregean view. Then, I will mention some rival positions and say why I hold the Neo-Fregean view instead of them.

On the Neo-Fregean view, concepts are individuated at the level of Fregean senses. They equate to what Frege calls "modes of presentation". For instance, EQUILATERAL TRIANGLE and EQUIANGULAR TRIANGLE are different concepts even if they have the same referent. So, the Neo-Fregean view is an *internalist* view on concepts, since it individuates concepts at the level of "cognitive significance" (Peacocke 1992, 3). Note that "cognitive significance" distinguishes between two concepts even when a subject possesses both of them. In cases of conceptual amelioration, subjects typically possess both concepts, and they *know* that these concepts have the same referent. Still, each concept presents the referent in a different mode, and subjects (typically) only *endorse* one of these modes.

One way to explicate Fregean senses is to characterise them as *ways of thinking*. Gareth Evans (in Evans 1983, §§ 1.4–1.5) has done so. Given that we individuate concepts at the level of senses, the advantage of Evans's explication is that it gives us a characterization of concepts

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[5]   The Neo-Fregeans Gareth Evans (1983), Christopher Peacocke (1992), and Edward Zalta (2001) likewise individuate concepts at the level of Fregean senses.

as ways of thinking. This works very well for conceptual amelioration. Here, the question often is which way of thinking about something we wish to endorse. (For instance, we can change our way of thinking about refugees so that we no longer exclude people fleeing for economic reasons from being refugees.)

More precisely, according to Evans, ways of thinking constitute cognitive attitudes:

> Equally, we must not make our discrimination of ways of thinking of objects so coarse that we reckon a subject to be thinking about an object in the same way in two episodes of thinking about it, when it would be perfectly possible for the subject coherently to take different attitudes towards the thoughts thus entertained. (Evans 1983, 20)

Following Evans' characterisation, conceptual amelioration aims to change concepts in order to change these cognitive attitudes. To illustrate, let us say that a conservatively-minded person believes that 'true marriage' is different from 'legal marriage' (assuming that same-sex couples are allowed to marry in the relevant country). This person holds a cognitive attitude which affirms the truth of the sentence "same-sex couples are legally married" but denies the truth of the sentence "same-sex couples are truly married". Evans' criterion predicts that there are two different concepts in play here. Let us say that, for the conservative, 'is truly married' expresses the concept MARRIED$_\text{D}$ (different-sex couples only), while 'is legally married' expresses the concept MARRIED$_\text{I}$ (includes same-sex couples).

The aim for us, being conceptual ameliorators, could be that the conservative (and everybody) affirms the truth of the sentence "same-sex couples are truly married". In Evans' spirit, this changed truth evaluation mirrors a change in the attitude towards the thought entertained (see the quotation above). For instance, our aim could be that the conservative and everybody change their attitudes towards the thought that same-sex people are genuinely married. In conceptual amelioration, this changed attitude is *based on replacing the concept/way of thinking* that is one constituent of the thought in question. In our example, the ameliorators' aim is that 'is truly married' expresses the concept MARRIED$_\text{I}$ (instead of MARRIED$_\text{D}$) for everyone. So, MARRIED$_\text{D}$ should be replaced by MARRIED$_\text{I}$. This is how I will theorise conceptual amelioration in the remainder.

The example should have made plausible that the Neo-Fregean view is a viable way to theorise about socio-political conceptual amelioration. Ways of thinking seem to be the suitable target for what ameliorators try to target in examples like *marriage*. That being said, I am well aware that many theorists hold different views on concepts and conceptual amelioration and will, therefore, not agree with the Neo-Fregean approach.

There are two main kinds of opponents to the Neo-Fregean view. Opponents of the first kind do not agree that concepts are the target of "conceptual" amelioration. Instead, they mainly say that conceptual amelioration targets linguistic meanings (e.g. Cappelen 2018; Pinder 2020, 2021).

Opponents of the second kind are not opposed to involving concepts in their theoretical picture. However, they do not agree with the *internalist* Neo-Fregean characterisation of concepts. These *externalists* hold that subjects' ways of thinking do not matter for individuating concepts. Instead, they think concepts are individuated by factors external to cognitive perspectives (for instance, by causal links from the environment to subjects' minds). Consequently, the concept-externalist Sarah Sawyer (2018, 2020) claims that "conceptual" amelioration does not change concepts but conceptions.

Quite briefly, I will state my reasons for preferring the Neo-Fregean view to the alternatives mentioned above.[6]

First, why not simply say that conceptual amelioration targets *word meanings*? The problem with this suggestion is that in examples like 'marriage', their change does not seem to go along with the change we should be interested in. In our previous example, the conservative may need to accept that the word 'marriage', in her present society, has a meaning which includes same-sex couples. Still, the conservative may not have changed her way of thinking about marriage. For instance, she may use expressions like 'genuine marriage' or 'original marriage' to still refer to her way of thinking about marriage. To express her way of

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[6] I do so more extensively in Mamin (forthcoming), where I additionally contrast concepts/ways of thinking with internalist *psychological* (vs. Fregean) concepts and *classification procedures* as the targets of conceptual amelioration.

thinking/concept, the conservative uses expressions with their associated meanings. If some expressions have changed their canonical meaning, she may use different expressions to still successfully communicate her way of thinking to others. Accordingly, what is relevant and should be targeted by ameliorators are ways of thinking instead of linguistic meanings.

Second, why not going for concept-externalism? For concepts referring to natural kinds like *arthritis* (Burge 1979), externalism might be the right choice. So, it makes sense to say that a patient who mistakenly thinks he has arthritis in his thigh nevertheless possesses the concept ARTHRITIS, having an incomplete understanding of it. Externalists frame this case by saying that the patient has an *incomplete conception* of the concept ARTHRITIS (and the doctor has a better conception of the same concept) (Millikan 2000, 11–14). In this externalist picture, amelioration would concern *conceptions,* whereas the concept stays the same throughout the amelioration.

Turning to socio-political cases, this externalist view of concepts seems less plausible. For instance, can we say that our conservative has, in fact, the same concept of marriage as we (the ameliorators) do, and she has an incomplete conception of it? This view seems more adventurous, at least for socio-political concepts like MARRIAGE. However, I do not wish to rule it out here. Everything I will say about the relation between concepts and social kinds should be translatable to *conceptions* and social kinds in the concept-externalist framework.

3   Concepts *generate* social kinds

I turn to how concepts, characterised as ways of thinking, are related to *social kinds*. The first thing to note is that socio-political concepts play not only a representing but also an active, i.e. *generating,* role regarding social kinds. This is what distinguishes socio-political from natural kind concepts and kinds.[7] In this section, I will reflect on the kind-generating role of socio-political concepts.

Think about natural kinds and concepts first. The concept WATER does not generate or change water. Likewise, the patient learning that arthritis cannot occur in his muscles does

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[7]   The same goes for artefactual kinds (see Rudder Baker 2004).

not generate or change arthritis. In contrast, a socio-political concept like REFUGEE may generate the social kind *refugee*. In other words, there would be no refugees without human beings who have (or have had) a concept REFUGEE. Who counts as a refugee is a matter of political decision, so the essence of the social kind *refugee* depends on the respective concept of a refugee.

In the present section, I am particularly interested in the ontological status of social kinds generated by concepts. My main claim will be that these social kinds are *fully real* once they have been generated by human practices or concepts. This realist view of social kinds is a key ingredient to the RSCA view.

Looking for support for the realist view of social kinds, consulting the literature on social ontology is helpful. Social ontologists have extensively discussed how human activities and thoughts relate to the social world. Uncontroversially, social kinds depend on human action and/or thought. In this sense, social kinds are *mind-dependent* (Thomasson 2009; Rudder-Baker 2004; Mason 2016, 2021). 'Mind-dependent' here has the general meaning that the existence of social kinds depends on the intentional actions of beings with minds. For example, the existence of the social kind *immigrant* depends on intentional human actions related to nations, borders, and legislation.

More controversial is the ontological status mind-dependent kinds have. In particular, it has been a matter of intense debate whether gender or race kinds are fully real (like natural kinds), non-existent, or something in-between (Mikkola 2022). For instance, race/gender skeptics think that race/gender kinds do not exist (Jenkins 2023, 239). According to race/gender skepticism, our categorisation practices, that is, our race/gender concepts, are not joint-carving.

In contrast, social kind realism holds that social kinds are *fully* real despite being generated by human minds. This social realist claim goes together with denying the claim that reality comes in degrees. Either a social kind 'is born' (from human actions and/or concepts), which makes it real, or it isn't, which means it does not exist. The advantage of this view is that we do not have to posit a new type of ontology for the domain of social or artefactual kinds in contrast to natural kinds. Both kinds of kinds either are (= 'real') or are not a part of our world.

Importantly, this is not to say that social kinds which are real are seen as positive. For instance, a social kind realist about gender kinds will say that there *really is* a social kind *woman*, encompassing people who have perceived female bodily features (and excluding people who haven't these features). Nonetheless, realists may criticise that this social kind has been generated. And they can even hope for the social kind to vanish.

In what follows, I will subscribe to social kind realism. I will use Rebecca Mason's (2016, 2020, 2021) social realist views as a theoretical backdrop for reflecting on socio-political conceptual amelioration.

Mason's central claim is that social kinds are both mind-dependent *and* real. What does "real" mean regarding concepts and social kinds? Mason (2020) follows Thomasson, who says that a kind is real if it has its boundaries "independently of how our concepts and representations might happen to divide things up" (Thomasson 2003, 582). Mason maintains that social kinds *are* fully real in this sense.

> By designating certain properties by a social kind term (e.g., "money"), we no more determine the nature of the corresponding social kind than we do by designating certain microstructural properties (e.g., being H_2O) by a chemical kind term (e.g., "water"). Thus, although it is true that we determine (perhaps stipulatively) which kind is referred to by the term "money," we do not stipulate what it is to be money. (Mason 2016, 842–3)

Approaching our topic, conceptual amelioration, let's see what a social kind realist thinks about the possibility of *changing* social kinds by changing concepts. For instance, consider someone who tries to change the social kind *money* by changing the concept MONEY. This person might claim that willingly extending the meaning of 'money' to include, say, Bitcoin changes the social kind *money*. If so, then one could conceptually stipulate and re-stipulate what money is.

A social kind realist like Mason disagrees. At most, the person in the example determines to which social kind the term 'money' refers. For instance, the person determines that 'money' refers to a social kind *money**, where *money** includes Bitcoin. So, ameliorators can determine to which social kind a term like 'money' refers, but they do not thereby change a social kind's nature. As soon as human minds or practices have generated a social kind, it has

its essential properties (that is, the properties that individuate the kind) necessarily.[8] Thus, a social kind, once generated, is fully real and cannot be changed by changing word meanings. We can make a new conceptual classification, but this just means we have a new concept. And, if we have a new concept, we generate a *new* social kind. This new social kind is *fully real* in the same way that the existing one is.

To further illustrate how social kinds are conceptually generated *and* fully real, consider a variety of social kinds, so-called "conferred property kinds". As Mason puts it,

> [a] kind is a conferred property kind if some of its essential properties are conferred properties. A conferred property is one that is instantiated in virtue of subjects' attitudes towards the entities that instantiate them. For example, my apple instantiates the property of being the apple I intend to eat just by my forming the intention to eat it. (Mason 2016, 846)

Following Ásta (2013), gender kinds (e.g., *woman*) are conferred property kinds. The same goes for kinds in the domain of race. For instance, the property of being *Black* is conferred to a person by people who judge the person to be Black (Mills 1998). Importantly, conferred property kinds are fully real. They are real even though they are mind-dependent. E.g., non-binary people who are judged (or not judged) to be a woman/man experience the reality of this social kind in a direct and personal way. Moreover, various social facts can be fruitfully explained by reference to a conferred property kind such as being a woman/man (these include income bracket and the likelihood of being a victim of sexual violence).

Conferred property kinds are good examples of social kinds being fully real, even when generated by concepts. Arguably, the conferred property kinds *woman* and *Black* are generated from the concepts WOMAN and BLACK. To confer properties on people is exactly what a concept concerning people does.

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[8]   According to social kind realism, essential properties are just the properties that individuate the kind. For instance, having pages may be an essential property of a book, whereas standing on my bookshelf is not.

In sum, social kinds are mind-dependent by virtue of being generated by human prac-
tices or concepts, *and* they are real. This realist view of social kinds dissolves the seeming par-
adox of a social kind being human-made and part of a concept-independent reality. Once a
social kind is generated, it becomes a part of a reality that is different from our concepts. As I
will explain, realist conceptual ameliorations can always aim to represent this part of reality
more accurately.

4   Concepts *represent* social kinds

In the previous section, I discussed the kind-generating role of socio-political concepts. In this
section, I turn to the more classical role a concept can have, which is to represent parts of
reality (including social kinds). This is what Mona Simion calls the 'representational function'
of concepts.

> [C]oncepts, much like beliefs, are representational devices, their main function is an ep-
> istemic one: the main function of our concept of 'chair' is to pick out chairs. Our concepts
> are mainly here to help us come know the world around us. (Simion 2018a, 93)

Simion goes on to say that concepts may have additional functions but that these secondary
functions 'ride' on the primary function of a concept, which is to represent reality (Simion
2018a, 94–6).[9]

I will not go as far as Simion in claiming that the representing role (or: 'epistemic func-
tion', in Simion's terms) is the primary or most important role of concepts. According to RSCA,
the limited version of conceptual realism I wish to defend, concepts are *sometimes* amelio-
rated to represent parts of a concept-independent reality more accurately. Whether primary

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[9]   Simion's claim of the primary epistemic function of concepts leads her to a critique of Haslanger's
proposed conceptual amelioration concerning the concept WOMAN (in Haslanger 2000). In a nut-
shell, Simion objects that "Haslanger is wrong to think that we are free to revise our concept as
we please, for political gain: the concept's political function rides on its epistemic, representa-
tional good functioning." (Simion 2018a, 97)

or not, the role of representing the world is surely an important role our concepts play. Thus far, I agree with Simion.

The importance of the representing role holds for social kind concepts, too. They represent the social world; and as we have to know the natural world, we also have to know the social world around us. For instance, having the social kind concept MONEY will help us to know an important part of our social world. Without it, we would have trouble navigating this world.

Now, an important thing to note concerning the representing role of social kind concepts is the independence of the referent. Considering the representing role of a concept, it presupposes a pre-existing referent. In other words, the part of reality a concept represents must not be generated by this very concept. Instead, it must already exist, independently from the representing concept.

In principle, we have no problem saying that this realist requirement of referent-from-concept-independence is fulfilled in the case of social kinds and concepts. Consider *money* again. As an instructive example, one can think about a child who learns what *money* is. Even though *money* has been generated by a human concept, it makes sense to say that *money* is part of our social reality. The child's concept of money can be evaluated according to its representational accuracy.

However, the money example already illustrates that we need to distinguish between different money concepts in relation to social kinds. First, we may speak of the money concept that generated the social kind *money*. Second, we may speak of the money concepts individual concept users at a later stage have, after *money* has been generated. I will come back to this distinction in sect. 5.

For now, I will continue to reflect on the representational role of concepts. Namely, the notion of representational accuracy needs clarification. What does it mean for a socio-political concept to (more or less) accurately refer to a social kind?

I suggest we evaluate a socio-political concept's representational accuracy by considering two factors: its (1) *joint-carvingness*, and its (2) *inferential correctness*. I will discuss both factors in turn.

(1) *Joint-carvingness* is a category familiar in metaphysics. The term has been coined by Ted Sider (in Sider 2009), who is a firm defendant of the *realist* claim that the world has a structure independent of our concepts. Following Sider, concepts are a main instrument for "truth-seekers" to carve at the joints of the world. The better they do, the better the concepts are. Taking Sider's example, the concept ELECTRON picks out electrons. In contrast, the concept ELECTRON-OR-BUILDING-OR-DINNER-JACKET-OR-DOGS picks out everything that is either an electron or a building or a dinner-jacket or a dog, which is why the latter concept is less accurate (see Sider 2009, 398).

Let's come back to our previous example. A younger child's concept MONEY$_1$ may include every item from her parent's wallet. Growing older, the child may replace MONEY$_1$ with MONEY$_2$, which excludes paper bills, business cards, etc. Clearly, MONEY$_2$ comes closer to the real structure of the (social) world, that is, to what money really is. In this sense, I will say that MONEY$_2$ is representationally more accurate than MONEY$_1$.

(2) *Inferential correctness* is a dimension we need to discuss representational accuracy, in addition to joint-carvingness. I derive this notion from Robert Brandom's work on concepts. Brandom thinks that concepts implicitly contain normative inferences. This is particularly salient for socio-political concepts.

For instance, Brandom (1994, 125–130) discusses an example he takes from Michael Dummett (1973), concerning the expression 'boche'. This was a pejorative expression to refer to people of German origin after World War II. 'Boche' implies that Germans are barbarous and cruel.

Brandom agrees with Dummett that, for concepts like BOCHE (the concept expressed by 'boche'), we have to distinguish between the *circumstances* and the *consequences* of their application. The circumstances of application concern conceptual classifications, so what matters for joint-carvingness (recall Siders 'groupings'). In the boche example, the concept is applied to Germans. So, BOCHE may be representationally accurate in the joint-carving sense, given that *German* is a real social kind and BOCHE picks out the members of this kind.

However, one should still reject the word 'boche' if one "does not want to permit a transition from the grounds for applying the term to the consequences of doing so" (Dummett 1973, 454), that is, inferring that if one is of German nationality, one is barbarous and cruel.

This suggests replacing the concept BOCHE with a concept which does not contain the problematic inference, say, GERMAN. Conceptual replacement of this sort is typically manifested in refraining from using the word that expressed the problematic concept ('boche') and using the word that expresses the replacing concept ('German') instead.

Socio-political concepts are not only inaccurate if they fail to pick out what really belongs to a kind; they are also inaccurate if they imply incorrect inferences. Although the examples I will discuss in the next two sections (concerning rape and marriage) will refer to the joint-carving aspect of social kinds, one should be aware that the evaluation of inferential correctness is irreducible and equally important in other cases of conceptual amelioration.

So far, a more general question concerning the kind-representing role has not been addressed: Why should it be important to evaluate socio-political concepts regarding their representational accuracy (joint-carvingness and/or inferential correctness) at all? I will discuss this question in the following section.

5   Two roles of concepts and RSCA

Based on the account of concepts and social kinds outlined above, I contend that we must consider two key roles concepts play regarding socio-political conceptual amelioration: a *kind-representing role* and a *kind-generating role*. I now argue that we can make sense of the RSCA view only by including the kind-representing role. I shall draw on Sarah Sawyer's discussion of the example *rape*. Doing so makes RSCA-claim (introduction) plausible.

According to Sawyer,

[a]cts of rape within marriage may not previously have been recognised as such, but they were acts of rape nonetheless. The change in linguistic practice reflects a recognition that the earlier linguistic practice got the facts wrong. It reflected a misunderstanding of the nature of rape. (Sawyer 2018, 143–4)

It seems important that our concepts are evaluated by how well they represent what *rape* is.[10] This stems from the idea that rape is something "in the world" rather than something conceptually stipulated. We do not wish to ameliorate our concepts to change what rape *is* (this is what I mean by 'conceptual stipulation'). Instead, there is a concept-independent reality to what rape is. Our conceptual amelioration aims to represent this social reality more accurately. Only then can rape within marriage have been rape all along.

Within the framework of concepts and social kinds I have outlined so far, the rape example can be treated as follows. Let $RAPE_{NM}$ be the concept excluding marital rape, and let $RAPE_{IM}$ be the concept including marital rape. Given the relation between concepts and kinds, one can expect that $RAPE_{NM}$ and $RAPE_{IM}$ have generated their own social kind: *rape$_{NM}$* and *rape$_{IM}$*. The pertinent conceptual amelioration would then replace *rape$_{NM}$* with *rape$_{IM}$*. However, according to RSCA-claim, the new conceptual classification should represent the *same* concept-independent reality as the old one. *And* it should do so more accurately. This allows one to say that rape was out there all along; it has been discovered rather than stipulated.

Regarding the two dimensions to evaluate representational accuracy (see Sect. 4), the rape example primarily concerns the first kind, joint-carvingness. After all, $RAPE_{IM}$ is more representationally accurate because it implies the correct classification: Acts of rape within marriage are classified, together with other acts of rape, in one common category. This is joint-carving regarding the social kind *rape*. The idea here is that the distinction between acts of sexual violence within or without marriage just gets things wrong. If we look at the reality of rape, we find no such distinction.

Now, to frame the rape example in terms of joint-carvingness certainly seems controversial. After all, 'rape' can express different concepts ('rape concepts'), referring to different kinds of acts (e.g. one rape kind excluding acts of sexual violence within marriage). How can one claim that one rape concept is more joint-carving than the other?

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[10]   Sawyer, who is an externalist about concepts, would not completely agree with the way I discuss her example. Her view implies that the concept RAPE does not change throughout the amelioration (see Sawyer 2018, 2020; see also section 2). However, this disagreement does not affect our common claim that an amelioration aims to discover (and not to stipulate) what rape is.

A clarification can remove this controversial aspect. In order to make room for the RSCA view, one kind of rape is already singled out and presupposed. The question is not whether this kind is the "true" kind out of different kinds of rape but only if our concepts are joint-carving regarding this presupposed kind. The real nature of this kind and whether any given example (like *rape*) is a correct example of a concept-independent kind is an open question.[11]

So, let's assume that a concept-independent kind *rape* exists whose nature both sides in an ameliorative debate wish to represent. Under this assumption, what is the part of reality that the concepts $RAPE_{NM}$ and $RAPE_{IM}$ are meant to represent? Can we really make sense of the idea that *rape* is a social kind, as I just said?

To argue in favour of this option, I will consider three possibilities of what *rape* might be. It might be (1) a natural kind, (2) a moral kind, or (3) a social kind.

If (1) *rape* is a natural kind, then we have a clear-cut route to accounting for its concept-independence. There is some plausibility to this view, given that rape may be considered to be a "natural" (even if unwanted) behaviour in humans and even non-human animals. This route would mainly lead us to question a clear-cut difference between natural and social kinds in the first place. However, I prefer to stick to a more narrow and metaphysically more neutral interpretation according to which, if "the conditions for being a member of the kind or category include *social* (properties and) relations", this kind is not a natural but a social kind (Haslanger 1995, 97; cf. Mason 2016, 841–42). In doing so, I meet the challenge to defend the RSCA view about non-natural kinds, leaving open the possibility that these could be ultimately reduced to natural kinds.

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[11] Relatedly, the claim that a concept-independent kind *rape* exists whose nature we wish to accurately represent does not amount to the claim that rape is an 'elite kind' (in the sense of Lewis 1984, cf. Mason 2021, 3988f.). 'Elite kinds' are kinds that are ontologically most basic, so that one could reduce other kinds to elite kinds. Realist cases of conceptual amelioration are not bound to represent elite kinds.

Rape could be (2) a moral kind. The claim "rape is wrong" would then be true in virtue of a moral kind that has the wrongness of rape as a part of its essence (independent of human thought and practice). This option seems to require a strong version of moral realism (moral claims are made true by facts independent of human thought and practice [see Sayre-McCord 2021]). I am not sure such a commitment is needed here. I leave it as an open possibility that *rape* may be a moral kind. Nonetheless, we do not need strong moral realism to account for RSCA-claim.

Rape could be (3) a social kind. This is less demanding given that *rape* is one of these kinds that are *mind-dependent*. That is, they depend on social beings' minds and practices (like also e.g. *money* or *refugee* (see section 3). If no subjects were thinking and behaving in certain ways, then there would be no rape. This option seems the most plausible.

Now crucially, we can account for RSCA *even if* rape *is a social kind*. The reason is that social kinds are mind-dependent but fully real (again, see section 3). Rape probably "entered the world" at the same time as human beings appeared. Nonetheless, as soon as *rape* was generated, it became a part of reality. If so, the more recent concepts—RAPE$_{NM}$ and RAPE$_{IM}$—can be evaluated according to how well they represent the pre-existing social kind *rape*. We can then safely say that replacing RAPE$_{NM}$ with RAPE$_{IM}$ can be a realist case of conceptual amelioration.

To take the argument one step further, remember the case *refugee*, where the social kind is mind-dependent not only in the sense that it is generated by a human practice but, more specifically, by a human *concept.* This can also be a realist case (I discuss another such case related to marriage in section 6). Let's assume that the concept REFUGEE$_{NE}$ has generated the social kind *refugee$_{NE}$.* This kind excludes people who migrate for economic reasons from being refugees. Later, we can ask how accurately our more recent concepts represent this social kind. Think about REFUGEE*: the concept sociologists and other scholars employ to describe how a society (like the one mentioned above) classifies refugees. Certainly, it is reasonable to evaluate REFUGEE* according to how accurately it represents the social kind *refugee$_{NE}$.*

In sum, once a human practice or concept has generated a social kind, that social kind is a part of our concept-independent reality. Therefore, the social kind can be more or less

accurately represented by different concepts. These different concepts can, in turn, be evaluated and ameliorated according to how accurately they represent the generated social kind.

Accordingly, the seeming dilemma for the RSCA view (see introduction) is dissolved: Social kinds are *both* mind-dependent and mind-independent. They are mind-dependent regarding their *generation* (from human practises or concepts) but mind-independent regarding their *representation* by different concepts. They are mind-independent in the latter sense because these social kinds are what they are independently of the concepts used to *represent* them.

In the final section, I will turn to a more complex example (concerning marriage) to see how this envisaged solution of the dilemma for the RSCA view works here. It is more difficult to make room for realism here than in the examples discussed previously. So, the marriage example will be a good touchstone for the account I've outlined so far. Also, it will help to clarify further how the kind-representing and the kind-generating roles of concepts work together.

6   The marriage example

Examples about marriage have often been discussed in the literature on conceptual amelioration (Cappelen 2018, Haslanger 2020, Richard 2019, Sawyer 2018). Given the historical and cultural variations that marriage has undergone (see Coontz 2006; Brake 2012), many people who agree that there is a concept-independent reality regarding rape will not agree that the same holds for marriage. Nevertheless, many advocates of inclusive marriage are unsatisfied when told that their marriage concept generates a new reality. After all, this would imply that a different kind of marriage has been created. "There is one common kind of marriage, and it includes same-sex couples," they say. Therefore, it seems equally difficult and desirable to make room for realism when ameliorating our marriage concepts.[12]

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[12]   Advocates of inclusive marriage may say so without genuinely commiting themselves to a metaphysical claim; i.e. as an instance of strategic framing. Since my aim is to make room for their utterance to be metaphysically grounded, I do not further consider this option. Also, I claim that

A preliminary threefold distinction will help us avoid confusion, namely the distinction between *marriage as an institution, descriptive marriage concepts*, and *normative marriage concepts*. Accordingly, "to change what marriage is" can mean three different things. First, changing the institution is what countries did when they allowed same-sex couples to marry legally. Second, changing the descriptive concept is necessary after such an institutional change, e.g., rewriting legal texts. Third, changing the normative concept is to change, in a more general and important sense, the way of thinking about what marriage is. To illustrate, recall the example of the conservatively-minded person from section 2. This person might be ready to accept that the institutional marriage concept has changed, but she still says that "true" marriage is possible only between a man and a woman. So, they are not ready to change their normative marriage concept.

I now focus on *normative marriage concepts*. Plausibly, these concepts guide how marriage as an institution is designed. A society will establish an inclusive institution of marriage only if its presiding normative marriage concept includes same-sex couples.[13] Normative marriage concepts contain the sets of individuals thought to be "marriage-worthy".

6.1   Concepts and kinds of marriage

Given that we are concerned with a normative concept, a conceptual amelioration regarding marriage can (with considerable simplifications) be schematised as follows.

Let us say that the concept MARRIAGE$_D$ is replaced with MARRIAGE$_I$ in some society. According to MARRIAGE$_D$, marriage is necessarily a relationship between a different-sex couple. According to MARRIAGE$_I$, married couples include same-sex couples. Now, the question is whether we can make room for realism in this kind of conceptual amelioration. In what sense does MARRIAGE$_I$ more accurately represent what marriage is? My answer draws on the two

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many advocates of inclusive marriage say so, not *all* of them. Equally, such advocates may see inclusive marriage as a *different kind* of marriage for which they claim equal legal recognition.

[13]   My aim is not to defend the view that the marriage debate is about the normative level (see Bantegnie 2021 for an argumentation against this view). Rather, my aim is to focus on RSCA in the marriage example. The normative level is decisive here.

roles of concepts from sections 3–5: concepts of marriage either (1) *generate* or (2) *represent* kinds of marriage.

Regarding 1, different marriage concepts generate different social kinds: MARRIAGE$_D$ generates *different-sex marriage,* and MARRIAGE$_I$ generates *inclusive marriage*. If we just stick to these kinds, we have no room for conceptual realism in the marriage case. One concept has been replaced by another, and each generates its own kind.

Regarding 2, there can be a reality of what *marriage* (the social kind) is, a reality that is not generated by the pre- or post-amelioration marriage concepts (MARRIAGE$_D$ or MARRIAGE$_I$). Even if *marriage* itself has been conceptually generated, it is a social kind that is fully real. So, MARRIAGE$_D$ and MARRIAGE$_I$ can aim to represent *marriage.*

To illustrate, let us consider a debate between the conservatively-minded person (who applies MARRIAGE$_D$), and a progressively-minded person (who applies MARRIAGE$_I$). At the basic level, each of these concepts generates its own social kind. Two social kinds exist: *different-sex marriage* and *inclusive marriage*. However, our ameliorators presuppose that the relevant concept represents part of a pre-existing reality, a reality that is not merely generated by their own marriage concept.

Therefore, if marriage is a realist case of conceptual amelioration, there is a third social kind involved: *marriage* (or *marriage simpliciter*). If so, then both parties in the debate are entitled to claim that their marriage concept better represents what marriage is than their opponent's concept (I explain further what *marriage* could be in section 6.2).

We can think of at least two *layers* being involved here. On each layer, we have concepts and social kinds which are generated by these concepts. Concepts can also represent social kinds (in addition to the kinds they have generated). Still, these kinds belong to a different layer since they need to be a part of a social reality which is independent of the concepts involved in the amelioration.

We have the following normative concepts and social kinds of marriage in play in layer 1: MARRIAGE$_D$, MARRIAGE$_I$, *different-sex marriage*, and *inclusive marriage*. In layer 2, we have MARRIAGE and *marriage* (the social kind generated by MARRIAGE). Importantly, all these social kinds are equally real. So, the kind that is represented is not on a different layer because it is more

real. What matters instead is that MARRIAGE_D and MARRIAGE_I refer to *marriage* in addition to the social kinds they generate (*different-sex marriage* and *inclusive marriage*, respectively).

6.2 *What is marriage?*

I have outlined how we can make room for the RCSA view in the case of marriage. To repeat, we can do so because the concepts involved in the amelioration (layer 1) have a referent (layer 2) in addition to the kinds they generate on layer 1. Now, I will have a closer look at layer 2. To press the point, we must ask what exactly the concept MARRIAGE and its generated social kind *marriage* are supposed to be. More precisely, we must ask the following questions:

(1) Where does the concept MARRIAGE originate from?

(2) What is the social kind *marriage*?

(3) How can we make sense of *marriage* as a part of a reality (layer 2) which is independent of the concepts involved in the amelioration (layer 1)?

Regarding 1, we might say that MARRIAGE originates in texts written during and after the so-called "marriage revolution" of the nineteenth century. Before the marriage revolution, marriage was not primarily about love. It was largely a matter of political and economic wranglings between families. So, "the radical idea of marrying for love" (Coontz 2006, 15) that is dominant today was something new in the 1800s. Take the 1863 poem "Home" by Dora Greenwell (from Coontz 2006, 163):

> Two birds within one nest;
> Two hearts within one breast;
> Two souls within one fair
> Finn league of love and prayer […]
> An ear that waits to catch
> A hand upon the latch;
> A step that hastens its sweet rest to win;
> A world of care without
> A world of strife shut out,

A world of love shut in.

Taken as a collective, texts such as "Home" are a reservoir from which common concepts emerge. That is, texts help evoke ways of thinking about marriage. To do so, the word "marriage" does not have to appear, nor do the texts have to refer to marriage in any direct sense. Ideals are evoked that have a significant impact on ways of thinking about marriage. The expressions "two birds within one nest" and "a world of love shut in" evoke ideals of exclusiveness in the marriage relationship, of marriage as a strongly binary relation, and of marriage for love.

Regarding 2, as a member of a society in which this marriage concept is dominant, I am surrounded day-to-day by MARRIAGE. It is endlessly praised and celebrated. MARRIAGE has, in large part, generated the social kind *marriage* by being expressed in countless ways since the marriage revolution.

Advocates for inclusive marriage might then refer to this pre-existing social kind *marriage*. For example, they might say something along these lines: It is not essential to marriage that it involves only different-sex couples. If two adults are committed and in love—if they are 'two birds within one nest" (to quote Greenwell)—then they are marriage-worthy.

The upshot is that if advocates of inclusive marriage claim to be referring to what marriage "really" is, they must refer to something pre-existing in the social world. The social kind *marriage* that involves essential properties, such as the ideal of marrying for love, is a plausible candidate. It is a widely shared ideal, and it does not *de facto* exclude same-sex couples.

In this view, *marriage* might even be a conferred property kind (see section 3). People do not have to intentionally confer properties to others. Conceptual classifications can do the conferring "themselves".[14] We can reasonably claim that a pre-existing way of thinking confers

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[14]   I do not claim that concepts are thinking and classifying by themselves. Of course, we need people to do that. However, what I deny is that a particular subject has to intentionally confer a property to someone. Instead, societies as a whole have their ways of thinking which imply classifications.

the property of being marriage-worthy to same-sex-couples. This can be the case even if some in society disagree.

Regarding 3, even though *marriage* was conceptually generated, it now forms part of a reality that is independent of the concepts involved in the debate. *Marriage* does not have the essential property that marriage-worthy couples are only different-sex couples. The ideal of marriage-for-love does not outwardly exclude same-sex couples. Even "Home" does not state that a married couple must be a different-sex couple. It does not matter if the author (or anyone else) only had different-sex couples in mind.[15] What matters is that MARRIAGE emerged from the texts produced by people like Greenwell. The ideal of marriage-for-love was primarily intended to involve only different-sex couples. But, it generated a social kind of marriage-worthiness shorn of that restriction. This is what allows advocates of inclusive marriage to say that they are closer to what marriage *really* is.

I have outlined one way to say what MARRIAGE and *marriage* may be. Certainly, there are other possibilities. Also, the RSCA view remains neutral regarding the properties of the represented social kind. Theoretically, it makes room for advocates of same-sex and different-sex marriage alike. In many debates, the question is also *which one* of the several pre-existing social kinds we represent with our present concepts. In any event, advocates of inclusive marriage who see marriage as an RSCA-case are relating back to marriage ideals that evolved in their society before inclusive marriage was accepted. In doing so, they are *prima facie* justified in saying that they have discovered (instead of stipulated) what *marriage* is, given that it is a social kind.

7   Conclusion

My aim was to make room for realism in socio-political conceptual amelioration. On the RSCA-view, conceptual amelioration is sometimes about ameliorating concepts in terms of their representational accuracy. To explain how this is possible, the RSCA-view holds that

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[15]   As a matter of fact, there were already people in the eighteenth century who thought that this new kind of marriage included same-sex couples (Coontz 2006, 8).

concepts generate and/or represent social kinds. Once generated, social kinds become parts of reality. Our concepts can then be evaluated and ameliorated in terms of how accurately they represent these social kinds.

A more general aim of this paper has been to defend the idea that we should not restrict our theorising about conceptual amelioration to the level of semantics or concepts. Such a restriction neglects an obvious question: "What are our concepts referring to?" Only by reflecting on the referents of our concepts can we arrive at a fuller account of conceptual amelioration. It is plausible that, in the case of socio-political ameliorations, these referents are social kinds. I am confident that further reflection on the relation between concepts and social kinds will be illuminating for any account of conceptual amelioration in the socio-political domain.[16]

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