Social Kinds

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What is a social kind?

When we want to characterize a theoretical notion such as that of a *social kind*, we do well to ask what that notion is for: who uses it and for what purpose? In our case, the answer is social scientists on the one hand and social theorists on the other, which includes theorists of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation and the like, but also historians and archeologists, to name a couple of fields that may not fit squarely under the rubric of „social science". But what is the notion of a social kind and the various social kinds for? Social kinds get used in forms of explanation of phenomena. These phenomena to be explained are often social phenomena, but can also be natural phenomena, when there is interaction between the natural and the social.

What are social kinds? That is one of the questions we will be addressing in this chapter, so I will offer you a minimal preliminary definition to stake out our territory. On the minimal definition a social kind is a collection of phenomena defined by a property or feature that is a *social* property or feature. For instance, it includes *money*, with the defining feature *being money*, *waiters* (*being a waiter*), *refugees* (*being a refugee*), and *recessions* (*being a recession*). It is a further question whether some other requirements must hold for the collection to have the status of a *kind*, and we will return to that question in due course. I use the term „collection" deliberately here, instead of „set", because what is in the collection need not be countable entities, such as refugees, but may include mass phenomena, such as money.

In this chapter I will introduce the reader to some of the main controversies over social kinds. They are:

1. What makes a social kind a *kind*?
2. What makes a social kind *social*?
3. Are social kinds real and objective?
4. Are social kinds compatible with naturalism?

1. What makes a social kind a *kind*?

Traditionally, philosophers influenced by Aristotle maintain that for a collection of entities or stuffs to be a kind, the members of the kind have to share an essence that is explanatory of the behavior of the members across a range of contexts. An essence is a set of properties such that if a member were to lose it, it would not only cease to be a member of said kind, but cease to be *simpliciter*. This essentialist conception

involves two claims: a) a kind has an essence such that nothing is a member of that kind without sharing that essence; and b) an individual member of a kind has an essence (derived from the kind essence) such that it would cease to be what it is were it to lose it. This conception of a kind has been part of the revival of Aristotelian essentialist metaphysics, coupled with scientific realism, that we see in Kripke (1980), Putnam (1975), Wiggins (1980), and other philosophers of the late 20th Century. Their work on natural kind terms involves a commitment to this notion of a kind. But as most contemporary theorists of social kinds are skeptical of the existence of social kinds with an essence, I will not assume the essentialist conception of kind in my use of the term „kind".[1]

Even if we reject the essentialist conception of a social kind, we may want the notion of a social kind to involve something more than merely be a collection of entities or stuffs sharing a social property. For instance, we may think that the collection of popular kids at Mission High does not qualify for being a true social kind, like genders or races, on pain of allowing any arbitrary collection to be a social kind. In the absence of the essentialist conception of kinds, what else can we appeal to to distinguish social kinds from mere arbitrary collections?

There are three types of feature that we can appeal to to draw such a distinction: a structural, a pragmatic, and a causal one. For instance, we can appeal to the *stability* of kinds across contexts (spatial or temporal) and say that the existence or membership of kinds are stable across contexts, whereas that isn't the case for arbitrary collections. We can also say that kinds play a *useful* role in explanation, whereas the arbitrary collections do not. And then, we can insist that kinds play a *causal* role in the world, whereas arbitrary collections do not. Given the interest in social kinds in the first place, i.e., that we are interested in them because they feature in social explanation, the last two ways of distinguishing social kinds from arbitrary collections are most helpful for our purposes and help us distinguish between two different conceptions of kinds at work among social scientists and theorists:

1. A deflationary, pragmatic, conception of a kind: a social kind is a collection of phenomena that features in social explanation
2. A robust, causal, conception of a kind: a social kind is a collection of phenomena that plays a causal role in social explanation

2. What makes a social kind a *social* kind?

All answers to the question what makes a kind a social kind appeal to something about subjects, but what that "something" is varies. I will explore the views that claim that: a) social kinds are description-dependent; b) social kinds are dependent on

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[1] Essentialist conceptions of kinds such as races and genders have been popular in the past, and been an integral part of racist, sexist and other oppressive ideologies, but that has been coupled with the claim that these kinds were natural kinds, not social. See Mikkola 2008/2011 and James 2011.

subjective attitudes; and c) social kinds are dependent on attitudes and/or behavior of subjects.

a. The social as description-dependent

Ian Hacking (1999) makes use of Elizabeth Anscombe's (1957) idea that intending something is acting under a description when he gives his account of kinds of people, or *human kinds*. The examples of human kinds that he is particularly concerned with involve ones that have been used in social or psychological analysis, such as child molesters, homosexuals, hysterics, and manic-depressives, but also ones that exemplify a particular culturally specific way of being, such as the Parisian *garçons de café*. His contention is, first, that one cannot be a member of such human kinds unless the concept of being such a person is available and, second, unless one intentionally acts in a certain way, which, following Anscombe, is to act under a particular description. This is part of his deeply historicist conception of human kinds, which means that kinds exist in their historical contexts but are not to be found also in other historical times and places that lack that historical specificity and the accompanying conceptual resources. Both his claims are controversial and in my view not sustainable without some further work. Can there have been homosexuals in Ancient Greece, for example, before the 19th century concept was available? If not, how do we make sense of the intuition that there have always been homosexuals and on what basis do we base our solidarity with people across spatial and temporal locations? Here one might want to distinguish between two kinds of groupings of humans: a thin one that requires only that the individuals fit a certain description; and a thick one where it is a necessary condition of belonging to that kind that one think of oneself as belonging to that kind and act out one's conception of oneself as such. The *garçon de café* may be just such a latter kind, as well as other ones that involve specific historically situated ways of being in the world, as mentioned above. The other type of cases that involve psychosocial analysis may fall into the thin category, where what is at work is classification of individuals by a third party, be it the state, doctors, or social scientists.

I have suggested that the cases Hacking discusses should be separated into two categories: those that involve a classification by a third party and those that involve self-identification. Following Foucault and Hegel, Hacking believes that the classification of human individuals always has causal effect on those classified and that they have to respond to how they are classified. They don't have to embrace how they are classified, they can try to resist the classification or negotiate it, but have to respond in some way. And often the response is at least a partial embrace of the classification. Why? Because often those classified are marginalized within the society and especially marginalized when it comes to conceptual resources to make sense of their own experiences, or what get called „hermeneutical resources“ and the promise of a conceptual framework to make sense of those experiences is very tempting. For this reason, what was initially just a third party classification of individuals, may develop into a culturally specific way of being in the world that people can identify with and aspire to. Thus a „thin“ kind can become a „thick“ one.

So, on Hacking's conception, for a kind to be a social kind requires the availability of a concept of that kind, with an associated description. Can we extract a conception of the social here? Yes, a social kind is a *description-dependent* kind. Some kinds require that the description be something the members are acting under, others simply require that the description be available. If we generalize this conception to all social kinds, then on this account phenomena such as recessions do not exist until the conceptual and linguistic resources exist to describe them. That may strike some as overly restrictive. Don't we want to allow, for example, that historians of antiquity be able to offer as an explanation of a certain famine and population migration that there was a recession, even though the concept of a recession was not available at the time?

As the reader can see, there are some issues involved in fleshing out Hacking's idea that social kinds are description-dependent, even if we restrict ourself to human kinds only. I will not settle the question here how well the theory can hold up to scrutiny, but move on to another conception of the social, according to which what makes a social kind social is its dependency on subjective attitudes.

b. The social as dependent upon subjective attitudes

When characterizing what makes a kind social, the main question in the social ontology literature in recent years has not been that of description-dependency but to what extent social kinds are dependent upon subjective attitudes.[2]

John Searle draws a distinction between two kinds of subjectivity: what he calls „ontological" and „epistemic" (Searle 1997). A phenomenon is ontologically subjective if the existence of the phenomenon depends on subjects in some way, including their beliefs, thoughts, and practices. A phenomenon is epistemically subjective if the truth value of statements about those phenomena depends on subjects in some way, including their beliefs, tastes, and opinions. Searle argues that the social world is ontologically subjective but epistemically objective. For instance, the existence of money depends on people's collective beliefs and commitments, but then it is an epistemically objective question whether a piece of paper is money and whether there is such a thing as money at all. In his earlier work (Searle 1997, 32), Searle is committed to the view that what it is for something to be a social kind is for it to be believed to be and regarded so, e.g., for something to be money is for it to be regarded as or believed to be money. Although generally in agreement, Amie Thomasson (2003a; 2003b) has rightly objected that not only can there be social phenomena that are of the kind they are even though no one has beliefs about them, there can exist social kinds no one believes there are. For instance, we can be in a recession, even though no one has beliefs about it, including beliefs to the effect that it is a recession, or even that there are such things as recessions. In response to such criticism, Searle is in his later work committed to kind existence being dependent on collective acceptance, but kind membership generally not (Searle 2010). As for phenomena such as recessions, he thinks they do, at base, depend on some sort of

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2 In addition to the authors discussed below, see also, e.g., Guala 2014.

collective acceptance, because they are "systematic fallouts" or consequences of the attitudes we have to other social phenomena.

Recently, Mohammad Ali Khalidi (2013) has argued for a tripartite distinction among social kinds. While he thinks that social kinds are attitude dependent, what kinds of attitudes are at work can help distinguish among three kinds of social kinds.

1.   Neither kind existence nor kind membership depend on attitudes of subjects towards the kind itself or its members, although these kinds depend on subjective attitudes about other things. For example, whether there are such things as recessions does not depend on whether anyone thinks there are and whether something is a recession does not depend on the attitude of subjects towards the phenomenon in question.
2.   Kind existence depends on attitudes of subjects towards the kind itself but not kind membership. For example, on Searle's account, whether the kind money exists depends on the attitudes of subjects, but whether a particular piece of paper is a member of the kind money does not depend on anyone's attitude towards it.
3.   Both kind existence and kind membership depend on attitudes of subjects. For example, on Searle's account, whether there are such things as cocktail parties depends on subjective attitudes and whether a particular gathering is a cocktail party or not, also depends on what people think about it.

Searle is chiefly concerned with institutional phenomena so his commitment to thesis 2 on the Khalidi scale fits such phenomena well. It does not fit well with phenomena such as recessions, or what I call „communal" phenomena such as races and genders.

I have argued elsewhere that what makes a social human kind social is that what its members share is a social property and I offer a conferralist framework to make sense of social properties (Ásta Sveinsdóttir 2011, 2012, ND). I make a distinction between two types of social property: institutional and communal. The key difference between institutional and communal properties is that an institutional property is conferred by someone or something in authority, whereas a communal property is conferred by people or entities who have non-authorized standing. The source of the authority can vary. In some cases it has been conferred on the person in authority at an earlier date (think of judges and umpires); in others it is produced by means of individual or collective acceptance or consent at the time. Likewise, the source of the standing can vary. The conferred property amounts to a social status that is constituted by the constraints and enablements on the bearer's behavior in the context. For example, being married is an institutional property conferred upon a couple by a one-time act and being popular is a communal property conferred on a person by the sentiments others bear towards them.

This account of social properties fits best for the social properties that humans and other subjects bear, and can also be extended for things that acquire new powers such

as money (a piece of paper acquires a status or power), but it isn't obviously applicable to things such as recessions. This theory deals best with social phenomena that are the results of things acquiring social meaning. This social meaning can be institutional or communal. In the examples above, there is a grounding property that the conferrers are attempting to track in the conferral and that property is the property that acquires a social meaning. Acquiring a social meaning is then fleshed out as constraints and enablements on the person or entity that gets the property conferred onto them. But things like recessions aren't that type of thing. Recessions are defined mathematically. A recession is something that meets certain mathematical conditions. It is a mathematical pattern that fits social phenomena. There cannot be recessions without people and their practices, but it isn't the attitude of people towards a phenomenon that makes it a recession; nor is it the attitude of people that makes there be such things as recessions. To be a recession is simply to fit a certain mathematical description that contains many variables such as economic growth and the like. This is so even though nothing can be a recession in the absence of social practices, and there can be no social practices in the absence of subjects engaging with each other.

It might now seem that Khalidi's useful tripartitie distinction is exhaustive and that any social kind is going to fall into one of his three types. If so, then the various philosophers of social kinds would simply disagree about which kind falls into which category. But things are not so simple. On Sally Haslanger's view (2012), there are social kinds that need not be dependent on subjective attitudes at all, but rather merely unconscious behavior of people.

c. Social kinds as places in hierarchical structures

In (Haslanger 2012), Haslanger's chief focus is on the construction of gender and race and other communal and institutional kinds of people. In her view, when one argues that a kind is not a natural kind, but a social kind, one is arguing that membership in the kind does not consist in the presence of some natural features, but in the members' occupying some social position in a hierarchy. In other words, on Haslanger's view a social property is a social status. While this is in line with other authors discussed above, Haslanger is less intellectualist than those authors in her view of how such statuses come into being and how one acquires that status, in that, on her view, subjects need not have attitudes towards the kind or the membership for social statuses to get constructed and for people to acquire them. These statuses, and the corresponding social kinds, are sometimes dependent upon subjective attitudes, but sometimes constructed by the unconscious behavior of people (Haslanger 2012, p. 128). The social kinds Haslanger has in mind are not just the kinds that satisfy a certain description, like recession, but can even be human kinds that don't have a special name yet but are what she calls "thick" social positions that are due to "the unintended and unconceptualized impact of practices." For example, in a context in which being a widow carries with it huge social consequences, being a child of a widow may also be a "thick" social position, with particular behavioral constraints and enablements, even though no one has as of yet conceptualized it as such or

named the particular social position. It then is a consciousness-raising project to identify that social position and the corresponding social kind.

It might be tempting to fold Haslanger's position into the views discussed directly above and say that what Haslanger's example brings out is that the kinds of subjective attitudes involved need not be conscious. That would then be in line with my conferralist position that allows that the attitudes or states of subjects that do the conferring need not be conscious. But bringing Haslanger into the fold would be a mistake. On her view, there can be social kinds, even human kinds, that are created by the systematic behavior of people. No attitude need accompany that behavior. The larger point here is simply that on Haslanger's view the key to our understanding the social is not to locate the social in subject dependency, but to look at social practices and phenomena that play some role in those practices. With that reorientation, we get a completely general and different account of what makes social kinds social. Social kinds are kinds of social relationship; they are places on a map of hierarchical social structures.

3. Are social kinds objective and real?

We have seen that most writers on social kinds take social kinds to be existentially dependent on attitudes or behavior of subjects. What does that say about their objectivity? They are clearly existentially subjective, but, as Searle pointed out, that does not mean that there are no facts of the matter pertaining to them. Social kinds are objective objects of knowledge, or as Searle calls it „epistemically objective". We can do empirical research on social kinds and find out facts about them. Truths about social kinds are not subjective in the way in which whether an apple tastes good or not is subjective and depends on the particular person taking a bite. We give social kinds existence with our attitudes and behaviors but then they take off and lead a life of their own.

This conception of the objectivity of social kinds is shared by other writers who work specifically on the metaphysics of social kinds, such as Hacking, Haslanger, and me, but in the race literature, and to some extent the literature on gender, it is common to see the view that if something is social or socially constructed then it is altogether subjective (see James 2011 and Mikkola 2008/2011), but I think that view rests on a confusion.

Questions about whether a phenomenon is real or not are notoriously hairy partly because the meaning of „real" varies wildly. For instance, sometimes, the word „real" is used to designate that it can be an objective object of knowledge, in the sense we discussed directly above. I have sided with the consensus among metaphysicians of the social above and argued that it is. Sometimes the word „real" is used to capture existential objectivity of the kind also discussed: is its existence independent of subjects and their attitudes, behavior, or practices? The answer to that question is clearly NO. But the sense of „real" that yields disagreement among theorists of social kinds pertains to ontological commitment: do we have to allow social kinds into our

ontology? Here the old medieval debate between realists and nominalists about universals gets a modern frock: do we have to be committed to the existence of social kinds as well as their members? Are the properties the members share part of our ontology?

Hacking has advocated what he calls „dynamic nominalism" about human kinds. On this view, the kind comes into being hand in hand with its members and with the availability of the name or description of the kind. This is why it is a *nominalism*. It is a *dynamic* nominalism because kinds come into being and then go out of existence with their membership, as opposed to existing independently of the existence of members. Hacking's dynamic nominalism has been influential and some theorists who work on race have followed Hacking and argued for a dynamic nominalism of race (e.g. Sundstrom 2002) or been otherwise influenced by him (Appiah 1996). Other theorists have argued for a different form of nominalism about specific kinds. For example, Natalie Stoljar argues (2011) for resemblance nominalism about genders on the grounds that there is no one property that all and only women (or men or some other gender) share. Instead someone is a woman, say, if they resemble the paradigm case of a woman sufficiently closely[3].

Haslanger explicitly argues for realism about social kinds. Her *critical realism* about social kinds has it that social kinds, while socially constructed, are real types. For Haslanger, saying that a type is "real" means that talk about that type is truth-apt (in contrast to the error-theorist or the eliminativist). But her commitment to realism about social kinds is not limited to the claim that talk of social kinds is truth-apt, because she thinks that a social kind can exist in the absence of conceptual and linguistic resources to identify it, as we saw above. We thus have a clear difference between her view and Hacking's on the relationship of language and conceptual resources to the social kinds they access. Hacking thinks the kinds are dependent on those resources, Haslanger does not.

4. Are social kinds compatible with naturalism?

The debate over whether social kinds are real or not is a debate fueled by desires not to allow „spooky" entities and stuffs into one's ontology and disagreements over what is spooky or spooky enough. The debate over whether social kinds are compatible with naturalism is similarly about such qualms. What is a commitment to naturalism? That is a notoriously hard question to answer. While many naturalist philosophers were influenced by Quine's conception of naturalism (Quine 1996), most contemporary self-avowed naturalists seem to have departed considerably from Quine's conception (see, e.g., Kim 1988 and Rooney 1998). Quine's conception of naturalized epistemology consisted of two methodological theses:

1. Normative epistemology should be given up: there is no such things as a justification for a belief; there is only an explanation for it.

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[3] See also discussion in Mikkola 2008/2011.

2.   Epistemology is properly a branch of empirical psychology and its methods thus empirical.

Let me consider the question whether a Quinean naturalist who finds normativity spooky can embrace social kinds. I distinguish between a hard core and a soft core version.

The hard core naturalist who rejects normativity altogether will have a hard time with social kinds not because an investigation into social kinds is inherently normative, but because the analysis of the creation and maintenance of some social kinds, in particular human kinds, involves positing norms for behavior. If one thinks there are no such things as norms, such explanations will not be palatable.

A soft core naturalist will allow for normativity but maintain that all normativity is constituted by the behavior or attitudes of subjects. There are no subject-transcendent norms, no subject-independent moral facts, and the like. Social kinds do not pose a problem for this kind of naturalist. They can do empirical studies on how social kinds are created and maintained and it is an empirical question which norms are at work there and how those norms come into being.

It is thus only the hard core Quinean naturalist who has a problem with social kinds. While most contemporary naturalists aren't hard core Quineans (a number of them are soft core) we haven't thereby settled the question of naturalism yet, because there are other commitments that naturalism can bring besides the one inherited from Quine. The most important one is not methodological, like the Quinean one above, but metaphysical. Are social kinds compatible with a picture of the world where the explanatory framework for all that is allowed into our ontology is that of natural science? Can the study of social kinds be reduced to the study of phenomena belonging to a branch of natural science?

When a commitment to philosophical naturalism involves the metaphysical commitment that only phenomena posited by theories of natural science are allowed into the ontology, social kinds pose a problem. Unless we can reduce talk of social kinds into talk of observable behavior and measurable brain activity, social kinds won't belong to the „fabric of the world" of this sort of naturalist. And while metaphysical naturalism is a prevalent commitment in the academy, as evidenced by the number of research programs that attempt to link mental states of various kinds with brain states, despite the failure of identity theory in the philosophy of mind of a few decades ago, theorists who are concerned with the social put any such questions of reduction to the side. If the social cannot be reduced to the physical, that just shows the shortcomings of a worldview that insists everything there is has to be describable by natural science. Meanwhile, there are serious social problems to attend to calling for both serious conceptual work and serious empirical work.

There is a weak sort of naturalism prevalent in much work on gender, race, and other such social kinds. This weak sort of naturalism involves a methodological commitment to having the theorizing informed by the empirical facts. But it isn't a one way street: just as the theorizing is informed by the empirical facts, so can the

empirical facts be interpreted in a new light with new theoretical concepts. This ongoing process of attempting to gain a deeper understanding of the social world is one form of the method of reflective equilibrium, where the aim is to reach a reflective equilibrium between what we count as the empirical data and the theoretical framework we devise to interpret and explain that data (cf. Goodman 1955).

To sum up, a commitment to social kinds is compatible with all but the most extreme naturalist positions, those involving a rejection of normativity and those involving a metaphysical commitment to a physicalist ontology.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced the reader to the main controversies over social kinds. They are: what makes a social kind a kind? What makes it social? And: are social kinds real, objective, and compatible with naturalism?[4]

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Related Topics

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