Social Construction

Aaron M. Griffith

Word Count: 7735 (excluding references, related topics and endnotes), 9020 (including references and related topics)

Abstract:

Two sorts of claims are ubiquitous in philosophy: claims that something is essentially the way it is and claims that something is socially constructed. The purpose of this essay is to explore the relation between essentialist and social constructionist claims. In particular, the focus will be on whether socially constructed items can have essences or essential properties. In section 1, I outline a number of views about the nature of social construction. In section 2, I outline a number of views about essence. In section 3, I consider ways in which certain claims about social construction may be thought to challenge certain claims about essences. Section 4 then offers rejoinders to these challenges and attempts to point the way toward reconciling constructionist and essentialist claims.

Reverse-engineering what makes it tick
Dissecting the fine-tuned mechanism
Rack and barrel, spring and pin
Its synchronous characteristics
To kill what makes it spin

— Meshuggah, "Clockworks"

0. Introduction

Two sorts of claims are ubiquitous in philosophy: claims that something is essentially the way it is and claims that something is a social construction. Water is essentially H_2O, heat essentially mean molecular motion. Race, gender, class, and disability are socially constructed. Given the ubiquity of these sorts of claims, it is an important philosophical task to understand how essentialist and social constructionist claims interact. The default position has been to view

being a social construct as incompatible with having an essence or essential properties. Constructionists about gender and race, for example, have long warned about the dangers of essentialist thinking. However, there are many different notions of essence and therefore it is an open question whether being a social construct is compatible with having an essence or essential properties.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the relation between essentialist and social constructionist claims. Among the questions considered are: can socially constructed things have essences or essential properties? Can humans construct essences? Are essences somehow fixed, necessary, or otherworldly such that nothing socially constructed can have them? Do claims about essences undermine the social and political importance of claims about social constructions? In section 1, I outline a number of views about the nature of social construction. In section 2, I outline a number of views about essence. In section 3, I consider ways in which certain claims about social construction may be thought to challenge certain claims about essences. Section 4 then offers rejoinders to these challenges and attempts to point the way toward reconciling constructionist and essentialist claims.

1. Social Construction

The metaphor of 'construction' connotes building up from or out of something. But many alleged social constructions do not exhibit this sort of building or putting together. Nevertheless, what lies behind the metaphor of social construction is the idea of *dependence*. To say that something is a social construction is to say, at least, that it is dependent upon social factors. By 'social factors' let us mean, generally, facts concerning collective human interaction. That includes collective beliefs, patterns of action, and practices. It also includes the ways that humans organize themselves and how they regulate their behavior through laws, customs,

cultures, and norms, etc. Social constructions are dependent on—created, determined, produced, or controlled by—social factors.[1]

The focus on this chapter is on socially and politically significant constructions. According to Hacking (1999) constructionist claims are socially and politically significant when some entity that contributes to an unsatisfactory situation, e.g., injustice, is shown to be a non-inevitable social product that is subject to change or eradication though social action. Claims of social construction are meant to reform, critique, and liberate. They have the function of revealing, unmasking, or debunking what is taken to be inevitable as social, alterable, and under our control. The social constructionist, says Haslanger, seeks to identify "levers for social change" (2012: 184).

It is standard to distinguish between (a) what is constructed, (b) what does the constructing, and (c) how it is constructed (Mallon 2019). Regarding (a), constructionists disagree about the scope of construction. Is everything constructed or only certain kinds or domains of things? It is important to distinguish between the construction of 'worldly' entities—objects, facts, properties, kinds, groups, institutions, states of affairs—and the construction of *representations*—concepts, theories, ideologies, ideas, beliefs, etc. (See Ritchie this volume II.9 on representation and essence.) Scientific theories making reference to quarks, bosons, and electrons have a history involving human choices that constructionists have traced. While there are important issues surrounding how concepts, theories, and ideas are produced or selected, our focus will be on the construction of objects. The construction of things, properties, and kinds, in particular, are among the more controversial cases of construction.

Once it's been fixed what has been constructed, then focus shifts to (b), what does the constructing. What sorts of social factors are responsible for the existence or properties of the

constructed entity? Suppose, for instance, the fact that a certain piece of paper is a US dollar bill is socially constructed. The piece of paper is an artifact that humans have created, but the status of the paper as a dollar bill is determined, on certain theories, by our collective attitudes towards it or bills like it (Searle 1995, Thomasson 2003, Epstein 2015). In other cases, human action, convention, and patterns of interaction are the producers. For example, recessions and racism seem to be produced by patterns of human interaction, even when the agents involved are unaware of their role in the production (Thomasson 2003, Khalidi 2015). In still other cases, material things are thought to be contributing to the construction of the object. Racial categories, for instance, are thought by some to be maintained and enforced by material infrastructure, e.g., the placement of highways and sources of pollution or the distribution of resources across a city (Sundstrom 2003, Taylor 2013, Mallon 2018, Liao and Huebner 2021).

The next question is (c), how the entity has been constructed. The question here is the form which construction takes. Constructionists distinguish between *causal* and *constitutive* social construction. The distinction, roughly, is one between an object being the causal product of social factors and the object (somehow) consisting in social factors. Environmental pollution may be regarded as a causal construction: smog is caused to exist and have its features by the collective activities of human beings.

> X is socially *constructed causally* iff social factors play a central role in causing the
>
> existence of X or X's properties. (Cf. Haslanger 2003: 317 and Mallon 2019: 1.3).

Some feminists, for example, have suggested that certain sex-typical physiological traits of males and females, such as height and physical strength, are causal products of centuries of patriarchal social arrangements.[2] On social learning views of gender, for instance, gender (or gender

characteristics) is the causal result of socialization or social learning. One is socialized from a very young age to accept certain masculine or feminine gender norms (e.g., appropriate temperament, character, interests, etc.) by one's parents, peers, and culture.[3] Gendered treatment of children and their subsequent conformity with gendered norms is causally responsible for one's gender on these views.

On the other side, something is said to be socially constructed *constitutively* when it is in some sense made up of (rather than caused by) social factors:

X is socially *constitutively constructed* iff social factors play a central role in defining what X is (cf. Haslanger 2003: 318)

Social kinds such as *being a husband*, *being a war criminal*, or *being a landlord*, are candidates for constitutive social constructions. *Being a landlord*, for instance, involves standing in social relations to tenants, contractors, and city officials, among other things.

Recently, some have argued that constitutive social construction should be construed in terms of metaphysical grounding (Epstein 2015, Schaffer 2017, Griffith 2018a).[4] Grounding is a non-causal form of dependence in which the grounded item exists/obtains in virtue of its grounds. Grounds non-causally generate or produce that which they ground. In the case of social construction, the grounds are taken to involve social factors, the grounded is the socially constructed object, and the grounding connection is the relation of social construction. One motivation for framing constructionist claims in terms of grounding is that it brings such claims into a more general framework of metaphysical dependence and structure.[5]

From here on out I'll sometimes drop the 'social' in 'social construction.' Even though there are non-social kinds of construction, e.g., set construction, it should be understood that all references to construction are references to social construction.

2. Essence

Locke famously says, "Essence may be taken for the very being of any thing, whereby it is, what it is" (1975: III.iii.15). Talk of essence is talk of the nature of a thing, i.e., about *what that thing is.* While many doubt that essence can be analyzed in terms of modality, most agree that essentialist claims entail necessities. (See Correia (this volume II.2) on non-modal conceptions of essence.) If *x* is essentially *F*, then necessarily *x* is *F* (Fine 1994). It is important to distinguish between claims about the essence of individual things and those about the essence of kinds. (In this volume see Scarpati (III.3) and Robertson Ishii (II.5) on individual essentialism and chapters by Tahko (II.4), Brigandt (III.2), and Mallon (III.8) on kind essentialism.) The former concern the nature of individuals whereas the latter concern the nature of kinds. Witt (1995, 2011) argues convincingly that the two kinds of essentialism are distinct. While there are many interesting questions regarding individual essentialism (e.g., "Do I essentially have the gender I do?"), our focus here will be on kind essentialism. The reason for this is that many of the most interesting and important social constructionist claims are about kinds (categories, types) of things rather than individual members of kinds.

One way to conceive of an essence is as the set of properties that make a thing what it is (Oderberg 2007). Another approach to essence is to view a statement of the essence as giving a 'real definition' of a kind.[6] This is not merely a definition of the word denoting the thing, but of the very thing itself. According to Kit Fine, essentialist claims have the form 'It lies in the nature

of x that p'. For example, it lies in the nature of heat to be mean molecular kinetic motion. The essence of an object, on Fine's view, is the collection of propositions that are 'rendered true' by the very nature of the object. I'll frame things in terms of essential properties as we go, but those who like Fine's framework should feel free to translate talk of essential properties into talk of essentialist truths and talk of essences into talk of sets of truths rendered true by the very nature of the object.

There are a variety of forms that kind essentialism can take, some stronger than others. In its most robust form, a statement of a kind K's essence will identify,

(a) Properties that are each necessary and jointly sufficient for membership in K.

(b) Properties that distinguish K from other kinds.

(c) Properties that explain and allow us to predict the characteristic features of Ks because they either cause or constitute those features.

(d) Properties of the following sort:

- Universals that all members of K share,

- Objective, natural, and mind-independent properties, e.g., properties studied by the natural sciences,

- Intrinsic properties, i.e., properties that their bearers would have if they were isolated from all other things,

- Non-disjunctive properties.

Let Strong Essentialism about a kind K be the most robust form of essentialism:

Strong Essentialism: For a kind K, there are properties that satisfy (a) through (d).

Obviously, there are variety of views that are weaker than Strong Essentialism. Weaker forms of essentialism may meet some but not all the conditions in (a) through (d). For example, a view might allow that the properties of K are necessary and sufficient for kind membership but deny that they allow us to predict characteristic features of Ks. Or a view might allow some of the properties in K's essence to be relational, extrinsic, or mind-dependent properties of their bearers. So let's acknowledge that there are a spectrum of views between Strong Essentialism and what can be called Weak Essentialism:

Weak Essentialism: For a kind K, K has some essential properties.

This form of essentialism only requires the kind to have at least one essential property. The properties mentioned in (a) through (d) are examples of the sorts of essential properties K may have, though they are not limited to them.

3. Social Constructionist Challenges to Essentialism

In this section, we'll consider several arguments for thinking that socially constructed kinds have no essences. We won't consider arguments that cast doubt on essentialism in general that would thereby also apply to constructed things. Rather the focus will be on arguments that attempt to show that being a social construct is incompatible with having an essence.

Argument 1: Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

(1) K is socially constructed.

(2) If K is socially constructed, then there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in K.

(3) Therefore, there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in K.

(4) If K has an essence, then there are necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in K.

(5) Therefore, K does not have an essence.

The crux of the argument is premise (2). If there were *necessary* conditions for belonging to a kind, then all members of the kind would have these properties in common. Constructionists about gender, for example, worry that specifying necessary conditions for womanhood would require all women to have certain physical features, beliefs, experiences, self-conceptions, etc. But this would ignore and obscure the vast differences between women (Spelman 1988). A related worry is that specifying necessary conditions for kind membership would inevitably exclude from membership people that ought to be included in the kind.[7] Regarding gender, trans women would be excluded from womanhood if being a woman required having certain anatomical features or certain early life experiences. The more general worry is that members of constructed kinds exhibit too much diversity to share a rigidly defined essence. (See Rosario this volume III.8 for discussion of sex, gender, and essence.)

Constructionists who want to push back on the argument could reject (2). They can allow disjunctive or gerrymandered properties to be part of the essence of a constructed kind K. That would allow them to say that it is necessary and sufficient for being a K that one has F or G or H,

etc. This strategy offers prospects for identifying necessary and sufficient conditions for being a K without the implication that all members of K share specific, non-disjunctive, intrinsic properties.

On the other hand, the constructionist might reject (4). They could point out that only Strong Essentialism demands that essences involve properties that are necessary and sufficient for membership in the kind. Some weaker essentialisms are compatible with the view that there is some threshold for membership: if x has enough of the features then x is a member without any particular set of features being necessary.[8] Views that treat kinds as homeostatic property clusters (HPC) have it that members of a kind tend to share features. (For further discussion, see Brigandt (III.2), Mallon (III.8), and Dumsday (II.6) in this volume.) These properties are reliably exemplified together due to some mechanism (causal or otherwise), such that they individuate the kind and allow for useful explanation and prediction about the kind, without requiring that all members of the kind have the same properties (Mallon 2016, Boyd 1999, and Brown this volume III.7). As long as there is a stable cluster of these properties due to some mechanism which sustains the clustering of the properties (due presumably to social factors in the case of social kinds), we have a kind with a nature. HPC social kinds would still allow us to demarcate the boundaries of the kinds and allow for generalization and inferences about members of the kind without requiring universal necessary features of all members (cf. Stoljar (1995: 283).

Even though Weak Essentialism only requires that the kind have an essential property, it may not get the constructionist out of the concern at the root of Argument 1. The concern is that essentialist claims about constructed kinds entail that there is something in common, indeed, something necessary to all members of the kind. After all, if Ks (qua Ks) are essentially Fs, then Ks are necessarily Fs. That there are necessary features of Ks may appear to be at odds with the

constructionist insistence that constructed kinds are not inevitable, need not be as they in fact are, and are "not determined by the nature of things" as Hacking says.[9] So there is no guarantee that weaker essentialisms about socially constructed kinds avoids the worries about accounting for diversity and avoiding exclusion.

Can essentialism do without necessary conditions on kind membership? Can an essence be constituted by a set of merely sufficient properties? One could have a view of social kinds on which the essence of the kind is made up of a set of properties that are each sufficient for kind membership. Such a view is consistent with some accounts of essential properties, e.g.,

> A property *P* is *an essential property* of being an *F iff* anything is an *F* partly in virtue of having *P*. A property *P* is *the essence* of being an *F iff* anything is an *F* in virtue of having *P*. The essence of being *F* is the sum of its essential properties." (Devitt 2008: 345).

Devitt's definition allows for a range of properties $P_1, \ldots, P_n$ to belong to the essence of F if for each property, P_i, something is an F in virtue of having P_i. It need not follow from the possibility that several properties may be sufficient without any being necessary for kind membership that the kind would be *purely* disjunctive, e.g., to be K is to be either P_1, or P_2, or P_3, etc. Khalidi (2013: 16ff.) discusses 'polythetic' kinds, i.e., kinds that are not defined in terms of a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient properties. Some polythetic kinds are defined by "complex constructions of properties, such as $K_1 = P_1 \& (P_2 \vee P_3)$, or $K_2 = P_1 \& ((P_2 \vee P_3) \& P_4)$" (2015: 16). Other polythetic kinds may be such that any two members of the kind K will share properties but where there is no single (non-disjunctive) property had by all members of K. So while K is necessarily P if K is essentially P, P itself may be a complex property that involves

disjunction. This allows different members of K to display important differences. It remains to be seen whether any constructed kinds exhibit essences like this, but it is a metaphysical possibility that the essence of constructed kinds need not involve a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient properties that rigidly demarcate the kind.

Argument 2: Mind-(In)dependence

Our second argument pits the mind dependence of constructed kinds against the mind independence of essences.

(6) K is socially constructed.

(7) If K is socially constructed, then K is mind dependent.

(8) Therefore, K is mind dependent.

(9) If K has an essence, then K is mind independent.

(10)   Therefore, K does not have an essence.[10]

The notions of mind dependence and mind independence admit of many different characterizations. Therefore, there is room for nuance when it comes to evaluating Argument 2. A kind may be mind-dependent in different senses. In a well-known paper, Khalidi (2015: 9) outlines three forms of mind-dependence kinds might exhibit.

(i)   K depends neither for its existence nor the instantiation of its instances on our having propositional attitudes toward K or its instances, respectively. E.g., racism and recessions.

(ii)   K depends for its existence, but not the instantiation of its instances, on our having propositional attitudes towards K or its instances, respectively. E.g., war and money.

(iii)   K depends for its existence and for the instantiation of its instances on our having propositional attitudes towards K and its instances, respectively. E.g., permanent resident, prime minister.

Kinds of type (i) are mind independent with respect to propositional attitudes toward the kind itself. Yet, that is compatible with being dependent on a variety of social factors, including minds and beliefs (those not directed at the kind). So, until the proponent of Argument 2 specifies the sense in which K is or isn't mind dependent, there is no real challenge to thinking that K being socially constructed is incompatible with K's having an essence.

So far, Argument 2 has been discussed as if there is no distinction between K and K's essence. But the constructionist might insist that once the distinction is granted, there is no tension between K itself being socially/mind dependent and K's essence being mind independent. We can hold that for K to exist and to have members depends on social factors, including collective beliefs. But K's essence—what it is to be a K (generically)—is independent of any social factors whatever. Even if K's essence involves (i.e., its definition mentions) social factors, e.g., to be a plumber is to perform a certain function and to stand in certain social relations, it does not follow that K's having the essence it does depends on social factors (see

Mason 2020, 2021). And that, even if K's having any members depends on contingent social factors.

Argument 3: Otherworldliness[11]

Our next argument is related to the previous one. Here, the argument attempts to find an incompatibility between the social dependency of constructed kinds and the independence of essences from worldly circumstances.

(11)   K is socially constructed.

(12)   If K is socially constructed, then K is embedded, i.e., K exists in virtue of circumstances in the world.

(13)   Therefore, K is embedded, i.e., K exists in virtue of circumstances in the world.

(14)   If K has an essence, then K is otherworldly, i.e., K exists regardless of circumstances in the world.

(15)   Therefore, K does not have an essence.

Socially constructed kinds are products of the social world. They seem to exist because of specific circumstances in the concrete world and the basis for their instantiation is worldly circumstances. Such kinds seem to be "embedded," as Raven (2022) says. Essences—and the kinds that have them—on the other hand, are conceived of as 'detached' and 'otherworldly,' i.e., as things that exist regardless of circumstances in the concrete world (Fine 2005). Presumably, their otherworldliness is what makes them objective, mind-independent features of the world as

it is in itself. Hence, Argument 3 could supplement Argument 2 in supporting the conclusion that constructed kinds don't have essences.

One response to this argument would be to insist on a distinction between the existence of K and K's instantiation (or its having actual members). One could then accept (14)—kinds exist and have essences regardless of circumstances in the world—but reject (12). It is not that socially constructed kinds exist because of circumstances in the world. Rather, they come to be instantiated in virtue of the circumstances in the world; things are constructed *as members* of kinds. Thus, kinds could have otherworldly essences, but embedded instantiation conditions. That would resolve the apparent tension between kinds being embedded and otherworldly.

But this response comes at a cost for the constructionists about kinds. Kinds themselves would no longer be constructed but be otherworldly, existing independently of human existence or activity. The kind *US citizen* would, for instance, exist and have its nature independently of the existence the US or the activity of its government and citizens. Humans would not even have a choice about the existence, persistence, or membership conditions of kinds. The only thing that would really be constructed would be whether anyone is in fact a member of these kinds.

Alternatively, one could distinguish between the kind and its having members on the one hand, and its essence on the other. The existence of the kind and its having members is embedded, yet the essence itself is otherworldly. *Being money*, for example, looks to be the sort of kind whose instantiation requires the social world to be a certain way. But the essence of *being money*, i.e., serving the function of being a medium of exchange, looks to be fixed, not based in worldly circumstances (Passinsky 2019 cf. Mason 2020: 60ff.).

Resistance to this response to Argument 3 is rooted in the conviction that humans, through our beliefs, actions, and practices, can in fact produce kinds, and not just their

instantiation or membership conditions. We decide those conditions ourselves. Discussing institutional kinds like *being a US citizen* or *being a dollar bill*, Thomasson writes,

> Our acceptance of a set of conditions C as sufficient for being K is constitutive of what conditions suffice for being K, so what conditions there are is determined by what conditions we accept. As a result, we could not turn out to be mistaken—our acceptance of the set of conditions C declaratively establishes the conditions for being K rather than attempting to describe pre-existing and independent conditions for being K. (2003: 588-9).

If setting the membership conditions for a kind establishes its essence, then, on Thomasson's view, we can fix the essence of certain kinds, namely the ones whose membership conditions are up to us.[12] There may be other ways to establish the nature of social kinds. According to Epstein (2015), we can 'anchor' kinds by setting up grounding conditions of the kind. While he doesn't frame things in terms of essence, anchoring could be interpreted as the construction of the essence (or essential properties) of kinds. If the grounding conditions of K help determine what K is, its nature, and we anchor these conditions through our beliefs, practices, and actions, then the nature or essence of K would seem to be constructed by us.

So there is a strong intuitive pull to the embeddedness of social kinds. We seem to require strong arguments for thinking that essences of constructed kinds are otherworldly and not embedded. But none of the conditions (a) through (d) listed above entail that essences are otherworldly or that humans cannot play a role in constructing essences themselves. (Of course, certain constraints on the properties that make up essences, e.g., those enumerated by (a) – (d)

above, may have this implication.) The conviction that constructed kinds are embedded seems to be rooted in the thought that constructed items are not inevitable, a thought that leads us to Argument 4.

Argument 4: Inevitability

(16)   K is socially constructed.

(17)   If K is socially constructed, then K is a contingent, culturally bound product that need not have existed and may be changed or eradicated given the appropriate social changes.

(18)   Therefore, K is a contingent, culturally bound product that need not have been and may not be given the appropriate social changes.

(19)   If K has an essence, then K is inevitable.

(20)   Therefore, K does not have an essence.

The non-inevitability of constructed kinds is at the heart of constructionist claims (Hacking 1999). Constructed kinds need not have existed or need not have the features they do. Moreover, it shores up the social justice motivation for constructionism: if a kind (or the characteristics associated with it) is not inevitable, but rather up to us, then we can change or eradicate the kind. The non-inevitability of constructed kinds also supports their fluidity and their possibility of change over time.

Like the worry expressed in Argument 1, the worry expressed in Argument 4 is rooted in the constructionist aims of justice. If a kind K has an essence such that the essence is

inevitable—in the sense of being determined, fixed, and unavoidable through social change—then the constructionist debunking strategy will fall flat. There would be no political point in highlighting the real but covert nature of K if membership in K has unjust consequences and there was nothing we could do about it. The power of constructionist claims is supposed to lie in their exposing the social world for what it is in order to point the way towards positive social change.

Argument 4 turns on premise (19), the claim that essences are 'inevitable.' If a kind is inevitable, then it either exists come what may or it has its characteristics come what may. Essences, according to (19), are fixed and unchanging. Inevitability entails a lack of control on our part: it is not up to us whether the things exists or what it's like. Being inevitable in this sense is straightforwardly incompatible with being a social construct. The question then is whether essences are inevitable in this sense.

One reason, connected to Argument 3, to think they are, is if essences are otherworldly, Platonic entities. Of course, the essences themselves may exist come what may, but it may be in our control whether such essences get instantiated. So even if the nature of some kinds is not up to us, whether it is part of the social world may be.

Another reason to think that essences are inevitable is that—at least according to Strong Essentialism—the properties that can make up essences are natural, fixed, intrinsic, and mind-independent. That entails a robust sense of inevitability: the nature of kinds is simply not up to us in the sense of being dependent upon us for its existence or features. While the strongest form of Strong Essentialism would secure the win for Argument 4, Weaker Essentialisms do not have this result. Weak Essentialism does not entail that the properties in an essence need be natural or mind-independent. Moreover, these constraints on essences may seem unmotivated. There is

little reason to deny that the kind *shopkeeper* has a nature that consists in relational, social, and mind-dependent properties. There is something it is to be a shopkeeper and it is in our control whether there are shopkeepers and what they are like.

However, Argument 4 cannot be so easily dispatched. One further motivation for the incompatibility between inevitable essences and non-inevitable constructs is that essentialities entail necessities.[13] As was discussed above, if Ks are essentially F, then necessarily, members of K, qua members of K, are F. So there is a clear sense in which the features of Ks are inevitable: necessarily, *if there are Ks*, then Ks are F. (I am not assuming that K is necessarily instantiated or that being a K is essential to individual members of K.)

Another reason for thinking there is a genuine tension between K having an essence and K being socially constructed in terms of the inevitability of essence is the 'looping effect.' Hacking writes, "People classified in a certain way tend to conform to or grow into the ways that they are described; but they also evolve in their own ways, so that the classifications and descriptions have to be constantly revised" (1995: 21). Kinds like *multiple personality disorder*, *widow*, *refugee*, and others are 'interactive kinds,' according to Hacking, insofar as the kind modifies it occupants, who in turn modify the kind itself. (See Brown this volume III.6 on essence and psychiatric kinds.)

If essences are inevitable—fixed, otherworldly, unchangeable through social means—then interactive kinds lack essences. The reason is that the essence of one and the same kind K cannot change due to the activities of K's members. At best, the members of K at t_1 could construct and come to constitute the members of another kind K* at a later time t_2. K and K* would not be identical kinds (despite possibly sharing members at different times). At any rate,

there would no real looping effect, but rather only the instantiation of one kind at one time and the instantiation of another kind at another time.

A final complication for Argument 4 is that 'inevitability' admits of various aspects and dimensions. Social constructions can be inevitable in some respects and non-inevitable in others. Race constructionists might think that it is inevitable that differences in skin color, physical morphology, and ancestry will always have some social meaning. That is, there will always be some social construction out of these features, though not necessarily the current construction we observe. Race is not inevitable insofar as the social arrangements, practices, and beliefs produced around different morphologies are liable to be changed. (See Mallon this volume III.8) on racial essentialism.) Such claims are important to achieving social justice insofar as they reveal the *nature* of the categories with which we are concerned with. When an account of the nature of social categories explains what social arrangements constitute the category, it helps pinpoint the specific aspects of the social world that need to change for the category to be eradicated (or at least un-instantiated). Moreover, we would not know how to identify the causes of a social category without understanding the nature and constitution of the category first.

So what is the relevant sense of 'inevitable' that would make constructed kinds ineligible for having essences? I think it is this: if essences are inevitable in the sense that we have no social control over their existence, instantiation, and their constitutive properties, then constructed kinds have no essences. If a kind exhibited no dependence (at any time) on our individual or collective beliefs, actions, and practices, then it would seem to be inevitable in a way that rules out its being a social construct. What Argument 4 comes down to is whether the properties in an essence are such that we could have this sort of control over them (either their instantiation or them being part of the essence). Conditions (a) though (d) alone do not rule out

essences that we control, but only the added constraints on properties (natural, fixed, intrinsic, mind-independent) in an essence stipulated by strong essentialism. As far as I can tell, weaker essentialisms allow for socially constructed kinds to have essences that are non-inevitable (in some sense relevant to constructionist aims).

4. Social Kind Essentialism

We have just looked at several arguments for thinking that being a social construct is incompatible with having an essence. In this section, we will investigate the positive case for socially constructed kinds having essences (or at least some essential properties), i.e., social kind essentialism.

(a) Constructionist Claims and Aims

The first reason in favor of social kind essentialism is that constructionists themselves have often, even if not explicitly, expressed their constructionist claims in terms of essence (Passinsky 2019: 10). Consider Haslanger's definition of constitutive construction:

> *Y is social constructed constitutively as an F* iff Y is of a kind or sort F such that in defining what it is to be F we must make reference to social factors (or: such that in order for Y to be F, Y must exist within a social matrix that constitutes Fs). (Haslanger 2003: 318)

One way to interpret what she is saying is that a kind is constitutively constructed just in case social factors are part of its essence, part of 'what it is to be' F. Another, anti-essentialist, reading is that Haslanger is simply talking about the definition of the *term* 'F'. But Haslanger herself indicates that what she has in mind is the definition of kind F—its real definition—rather than the term 'F' (Haslanger 2014: 31). On Haslanger's view, being constructed is itself defined in terms of essence. So, there couldn't possibly be a conflict between being a social construct and having an essence on this definition of being constructed.

Moreover, the debunking project that is so central to many constructionists aims appears to involve identifying social essences. Understood in terms of essence, the debunking project would aim at revealing that things we believed to have natural essences in fact have social essences. As Ásta says, debunking work consists in "exposing the beast for *what it is*" (2018: 36 emphasis added).[14] Assuming (plausibly) that these authors are not ignorant of the relation their claims have to essentialist views, we should interpret them as making essentialist claims about constructed kinds.

A second reason for social essentialism is that many of the most influential constructionist accounts of kinds like gender and race seem to entail that these constructions have essential properties. Commenting on Catherine MacKinnon's (1989) influential definition of women as sexual objects, Allison Stone writes,

> My claim that theorists such as MacKinnon are essentialists might sound odd, given the frequent contrast between essentialism and social constructionism. Yet social constructionists can readily *be* essentialists if they believe—as do these influential feminist theorists—that a particular pattern of social construction is essential and universal to all women. (2004: 40)

Similarly, in her well-known ameliorative account of womanhood, Haslanger offers an explicit definition of womanhood, i.e., necessary and sufficient conditions that define womanhood:

> S *is a woman* iff$_{df}$ S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction. (2012: 230).

Of course, each of these accounts has faced worries about them being 'essentialist' in problematic ways.[15] The point is, however, that many avowed social constructionists have taken themselves to be offering accounts of the essences of constructed kinds. That means that far from there being an incompatibility between construction and essence, these thinkers take the constructionist project to fundamentally involve articulating essences.

A related line of argument is that an essentialist framework is uniquely conducive to making sense of certain debates in social metaphysics. Asya Passinsky (2019) argues that Fine's notion of essence is helpful in clarifying and rigorously framing the debate between Haslanger (2000) and Jenkins (2016) over womanhood. Passinsky claims that this debate is fundamentally about the essence or real definition of womanhood. Framing the debate in terms of essence helps clarify what sort of explanation Haslanger and Jenkins are attempting to give of womanhood, namely an essentialist explanation of womanhood rather than causal, rationalizing, or functional explanations. According to Passinsky, the essentialist framework also explains disagreements about modal claims regarding social kinds. A debate about whether members of a certain constructed kind could have or lack certain features makes perfect sense in terms of disagreements about the real definitions of the kind. Since real definitions entail necessities, i.e.,

if being F is part of the real definition of x, then necessarily, x is F, different views about whether it is it possible for members of a social kind to have or lack a certain property are ultimately disagreements about the real definitions of these kinds.

Conversely, one could argue that *anti*-essentialism about constructed kinds actually *undermines* constructionist claims and aims.[16] Suppose we believe that kind K is socially constructed and deny that K has an essence (in a strong or weak sense). And suppose that K is a politically relevant kind (e.g., woman, LGTBQ+, refugee, undocumented immigrant). On these assumptions, we could not even say that K is essentially a social kind. That looks problematic given the constructivist aim of debunking the apparent naturalness of K. Moreover, constructionists aim to identify (more or less) unified groups about which socially and politically helpful generalizations can be made. Essentialisms of various forms offer ways to unify and generalize about social kinds. To this extent, some form of social essentialism may help these constructionist aims. The more anti-essentialism undermines our ability to identify commonalities among members of a group and say something general about the group, the harder it is for anti-essentialism to support unified political coalitions (cf. Zack 2005: ch. 2). Some unity among Ks is required to form a coalition and if there are no generalizations to make about members of K (as Ks), then it would be difficult to advocate for all members of K. Successful social movements rely on some dimension of commonality among and projectability to the members of the kind. Now whether that requires a commitment to Strong or some weaker Essentialism is debatable. Even if one is not convinced that a commitment to some form of essentialism is required for constructionist political projects, it could be argued that essentialism could be an auxiliary help to social movements insofar as it would help demarcate the social groups that are seeking to establish solidarity and political representation.

Still another case to be made for social essentialism is the argument that essentialist claims are in fact central to the social justice aims of constructionists. (See Stoljar (this volume III.10) on social justice and essence and Rosario (this volume III.9) on sex and gender.) Above, we saw that a number of constructionists (mainly about gender, sex, and race) seem to frame their constructionist claims as essentialist claims. That's no accident since the debunking project is aimed at revealing certain kinds for what they really are, i.e., revealing their essence, or at giving politically expedient definitions of kinds. Debunking claims are supposed to reveal to us that some kind is contingent, non-inevitable, liable to be changed, and under our control. This is central to the social justice aims of constructionists because the revelation about the nature of a kind is meant to aid in eradicating or altering that kind. More specifically, constitutive constructionist claims look to advance our understanding of the building blocks, structure, and mechanisms that create and sustain constructed kinds. That has the potential to open ways for activists to challenge unjust social kinds and social structures.

(b) Weak Social Kind Essentialism

Another class of arguments for social essentialism appeal to the differences between the forms of essentialism outlined in section 2. The argument is that while social kind essentialism may be incompatible with Strong Essentialism (because of the constraints it puts on the properties belonging to an essence), it is not obviously incompatible with weaker forms of essentialism that fall between Strong and Weak Essentialisms. Skepticism about essentialism is primarily rooted in worries about the strongest form of essentialism and the requirements it sets on essences, e.g., that essence involve necessary and sufficient conditions on membership,

intrinsic, natural, mind-independent properties, etc. Each of these claims about essences seems optional, not essential to essences. Prima facie, constructed kinds could have essences that are made up of relational, mind-dependent, social properties. Weak Essentialism, recall, simply says that a kind has some essential property. Weak social essentialism, therefore, avoids most of the serious worries about essentialism.

Moreover, attending to the objectual/generic distinction (see Koslicki and Raven Introduction to this volume) can help make the case for a version of Weak Social Kind Essentialism. That distinction, recall, is between what is essential to an object and what is essential for being of a certain kind. In an objectual sense—where the question is 'what is a?'—it may be straightforward to establish Weak Social Kind Essentialism. The 'object' in this case is the kind K itself. If it can be shown that K is essentially socially constructed, essentially mind dependent (Mason 2021) or essentially historical (Bach 2012), then Weak Essentialism is true of social kinds in the objectual sense.

Generic essentialism appears to be the more contentious version of essentialism to maintain, though. Most anti-essentialists about social kinds are not concerned about the status of the kind itself, but with what it takes to be a member of the kind. Weak Social Kind Essentialism about K in the generic sense must maintain that there is at least one property essential for being a K. Such a view faces the worries raised above (section 3) about specifying what property all members of K have in common. Perhaps this worry can be mitigated, however, if the property(s) essential for being K is generic enough to admit of being realized in different ways, e.g., Haslanger's notion of being systematically subordinated "along some dimension." Multiply realizable or determinable essential properties might allow enough variability among the

members of the kind to avoid requiring problematic commonality and universality among K's members.[17]

(c) General Metaphysical Considerations

The final case for social kind essentialism I'll consider appeals to general metaphysical considerations about essences. One line of thought is that everything has an essence (or essential properties), including, *eo ipso*, socially constructed kinds. Rebecca Mason, for instance, expresses the view like this:

> [T]here is no obvious reason to deny that social kinds have essential properties. If a kind, K, exists, then there is something that it is to be K. Moreover, the properties that specify what it is to be K are the essential properties of that kind. This is so whether the kind in question is social, psychological, biological, chemical, or physical, and so forth. (2016: 844)

This argument connects K existing, with there being something it is to be K, with K having essential properties. Presumably, the argument is that for everything that exists, each thing is what it is and not something else. And if each thing is what it is, then, there is something it is to be that thing. Whatever it is to be that thing is the essence of that thing. These considerations are general enough that, if correct, they would entail that constructed kinds have essences.

Passinsky (in conversation) pushes a similar line, arguing that if anything has an essence then everything does. (She adopts the Finean conception of essence on which an essence is a collection of truths of the form 'it lies in the nature of x that p'.) Her reason is that it would be

problematically arbitrary for some things to have essential properties while other things completely lack them. She argues that any way of explaining this asymmetry (existence/non-existence, mind-independence/mind-dependence) violates essentialist intuitions many have. For instance, can-openers are mind-dependent, but they do not seem to lack essential properties, e.g., the function of opening cans, for that reason.

5. Conclusion

What I've done here is provided a summary of the main questions and options about how essence and social construction relate. What we've found is that there is a solid case to be made that the strongest form of essentialism is incompatible with social constructionism. But there are many nuanced and weakened versions of essentialism that may be compatible with, and even advantageous for, social constructionism. Obviously, there is much more to say about each of the arguments raised here. I hope that the present work aids in structuring further discussion about essence and social construction.

Author Biography: Aaron M. Griffith is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia USA. His research is on truth, truthmaking, grounding, social ontology, and the philosophy of race. His work has appeared in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Philosophical Studies, Synthese, Erkenntnis*, and other journals.

Related Topics

Passinsky, Asya. "Artifacts, Artworks, and Social Objects" Chapter III.1.
Loets, Annina. "Persons" Chapter III.6
Brown, Danielle. "Psychiatric Kinds" Chapter III.7
Mallon, Ron. "Race" Chapter III.8.
Rosario, Esther. "Sex and Gender" Chapter III.9.
Stoljar, Natalie. "Social Justice" Chapter III.10.
Vaidya, Anand and Wallner, Michael "Conferralism" Chapter IV.4.

References

Alcoff, L. (2006). *Visible Identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Appiah, A. (1996). "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in *Color Conscious*, Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Ásta. (2013). "The Social Construction of Human Kinds." *Hypatia* 28(4): 716-32.
Ásta. (2018). *Categories We Live By*. Oxford University Press.
Audi, P. (2012a). "Grounding: Toward a Theory of the in-Virtue-of Relation." *The Journal of Philosophy* CIX: 12: 685-711.
Audi, P. (2012b). "A Clarification and Defense of the Notion of Grounding." In *Metaphysical Grounding*, edited by Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder, 101-121. Cambridge University Press.
Bach, T. (2012). "Gender is a Natural Kind with a Historical Essence." *Ethics* 122(2): 231-272.
Barnes, E. (2014). "Going Beyond the Fundamental: Feminism in Contemporary Metaphysics." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* CXIV(3): 335–51.
Barnes, E. (2020). "Gender and Gender Terms." *Nous* 54(3): 704-730.
Berger, P. and Luckman, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
Boyd, R. (1999). "Homeostasis, species, and higher taxa", in R. Wilson (ed.), *Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, 141–185. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Carnino, P. (2015). "On the Reduction of Grounding to Essence." *Studia Philosophica Estonica* 7(2): 56-71.
Correia, F. (2006). "Generic Essence, Objectual Essence, and Modality." *Noûs* 40(4): 753-767.
Correia, F. (2013). "Metaphysical Grounds and Essence." In *Varieties of Dependence. Ontological Dependence, Grounding, Supervenience, Response-Dependence*, edited by M. Hoeltje, B. Schnieder & A. Steinberg, 271—96. Basic Philosophical Concepts Series, München, Philosophia.
Correia, F. and Skiles, A. (2019). "Grounding, Essence, and Identity." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 98(3): 642-670.
Dasgupta, S. (2014). "The Possibility of Physicalism." *The Journal of Philosophy* 111(9/10): 557–92.
Dembroff, R. (2018). "Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender." *Philosophical Topics* 46(2): 21-50.
Dembroff, R. (2020). "Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as Critical Gender Term." *Philosophers' Imprint* 20(9): 1-23.

Devitt, M. (2008). "Resurrecting Biological Essentialism." *Philosophy of Science* 75: 344-382.

Diaz-Leon, E. (2013). "What Is Social Construction?" *European Journal of Philosophy* 23(4): 1137–52.

Epstein, B. (2015). *The Ant Trap*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the Body*. New York: Basic Books.

Fine, K. (1994). "Essence and Modality", in *Philosophical Perspectives 8: Logic and Language*, J.E. Tomberlin (ed.), Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company.

Fine, K.(1995). "Ontological Dependence." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 95: 269-90.

Fine, K. (2005). 'Necessity and Non-existence' (ed.), *Modality and Tense: Philosophical Papers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fine, K. (2012). "A Guide to Ground." In *Metaphysical Grounding*, edited by F. Correia, and B. Schnieder, 37-80. Cambridge University Press.

Fine, K. (2015). "Unified Foundations for Essence and Ground." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 1(2): 296-311.

Glasgow, J. (2009). *A Theory of Race*. New York: Routledge.

Griffith, A.M. (2018a). "Social Construction and Grounding." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 97(2): 393-409.

Griffith, A.M. (2018b). "Social Construction: Big-G Grounding, Small-g Realization." *Philosophical Studies*. 175(1): 241-260.

Griffiths, P. (1999). "Squaring the Circle: Natural Kinds with Historical Essences." in *Species: New Interdisciplinary Studies, R. Wilson* (ed.), Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press: 209-228.

Hacking, I. (1999). *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hacking, I. (1995). "The Looping Effects of Human Kinds." In *Causal Cognition*, edited by Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann J. Permack, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Haslanger, S. (2000). "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?" *Noûs* 34: 31–55.

Haslanger, S. (2003). "Social Construction: The 'Debunking' Project." In *Socializing Metaphysics*,   Edited by F. Schmitt, 301–25. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield.

Haslanger, S. (2012). *Resisting Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Heyes, C. (2000). *Line Drawings*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.

Hindriks, F. "Acceptance-Dependence: A Social Kind of Response Dependence." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (2006): 481–98.

Jenkins, K. (2016). "Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman." *Ethics* 126(2): 394–421.

Kimmel, M. (2000). *The Gendered Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Khalidi, M. (2013). *Natural Categories and Human Kinds: Classification in the Natural and Social Sciences*.   Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Khalidi, M. (2015). "Three Kinds of Social Kinds." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90(1): 96-   112.

Koslicki, K. (2012). "Varieties of Ontological Dependence." In *Metaphysical Grounding*, edited by F.   Corriea, and B. Schnieder, 186-213. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Langton, R. and D. Lewis (1998). "Defining 'Intrinsic.'" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58:   333–45.

Latour, B. and Woolgar, S. (1979). *Laboratory Life*. Beverly Hills CA: Sage.

Liao, S. and Huebner, B. (2021). "Oppressive Things." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103(1): 92-113.

Locke, J. (1975). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, P. H. Nidditch (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon   Press.

Lowe, E. (2018). "Metaphysics as the Science of Essence." In .), *Ontology, Modality, and Mind: Themes   from the Metaphysics of E. J.* Lowe, edited by Alexander Carruth, Sophie Gibb & John Heil, 14-34. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

MacKinnon, C. (1989). *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University   Press.

Mallon, R. (2007). "Human Categories Beyond Non-Essentialism." *The Journal of Political Philosophy*   15(2): 146–68.

Mallon, R. (2016). *The Construction of Human Kinds*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mallon, R. (2019). "Naturalized Approaches to Social Construction." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. Zalta. [http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/social-construction-   naturalistic/](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/social-construction-naturalistic/)

Marques, T. (2017). "The Relevance of Causal Social Construction." *Journal of Social Ontology* 3(1): 1-   25.

Mason, R. (2016). "The Metaphysics of Social Kinds." *Philosophy Compass* 11: 841-850.

Mason, R. (2020). "Against Social Kind Anti-Realism." *Metaphysics* 3(1): 55-67.

Mason, R. (2021). "Social Kinds are Essentially Mind-Dependent." *Philosophical Studies* 178: 3975-3994.

Mikkola, M. (2017). "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/feminism-gender/>.

Millikan, R (1999). "Historical Kinds and the 'Special Sciences.'" *Philosophical Studies* 95: 45–65.

Millett, K., (1971). *Sexual Politics*, London: Granada Publishing Ltd.

Oderberg, D. (2007). *Real Essentialism*. New York: Routledge.

Pagano, E. (2021). "What Social Construction Isn't." *Philosophia* 49: 1651-1670.

Passinsky, A. (2019). "Finean Feminist Metaphysics." *Inquiry* 64(9): 937-954.

Passinsky, A. (2020). Social Objects, Response-Dependence, and Realism." *Journal of the American   Philosophical Association* 6(4): 431-443.

Passinsky, A. (manuscript). "Social Essentialism."

Pettit, P. (1991). "Realism and Response Dependence." *Mind* 100(4): 587-626.

Raven, M. (2022). "A Puzzle for Social Essences." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 8(1): 128-148.

Rosen, G. (2015). "Real Definition." *Analytic Philosophy*, 56(4): 189-209.

Schaffer, J. (2017). "Social Construction as Grounding; Or: Fundamentality for Feminists, a Reply to   Barnes and Mikkola." *Philosophical Studies* 174(10): 2449–2465.

Searle, J. (2010). *Making the Social World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Spelman, E. (1990). *Inessential Woman*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Stoljar, N. (1995). "Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman." *Philosophical Topics* 23(2): 261–   329.

Stone, A. (2004). "Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1(2): 135-153.

Stubblefield, A. (1995). "Racial identity and non-essentialism about race." *Social Theory and Practice* 21   (3): 341-368.

Sundstrom, R. (2003). "Race and Place: Social Space in the Production of Human Kinds."
        Philosophy and Geography, 6(1), 83–95.
Taylor, P. (2013). *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
Vallentyne, P. (1997). "Intrinsic Properties Defined." *Philosophical Studies* 88: 209–19.
Witt, C. (1995). "Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory." *Philosophical Topics* 23(2): 321–44.
Witt, C. (2011). *The Metaphysics of Gender*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Zack, N. (2005). *Inclusive Feminism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

---

[1] Classic texts on social construction include Berger and Luckman (1966), Latour and Woolgar (1979), and Hacking (1999).

[2] See Butler (1993) and Fausto-Sterling (2000). This example is discussed by Diaz-Leon (2013: 1144).

[3] See Millett (1971) and Kimmell (2000). Discussed by Mikkola (2017).

[4] For concerns about the grounding approach to social construction see Barnes (2014), Pagano (2021), and Passinsky (2019).

[5] Another form of non-causal construction is conferralism, defended by Ásta (2013 and 2018). See the entry on conferralism and essence from Vaidya and Wallner (this volume IV.4). Others have used the notion of response-dependence to understand social construction. See Pettit (1991), Hindriks (2006), and Passinsky (2020).

[6] The connection between essence and real definition (as well as identity and grounding) remains a matter of discussion. Fine (1994, 2015) and Dasgupta (2014) associates giving essences with giving real definitions. Others have analyzed real definitions in terms of ground (Rosen 2015). See Correia (2013, 2017), Correia and Skiles (2019), and Koslicki (2012) for further discussion.

[7] See Jenkins (2016), Dembroff (2020), and Ásta (2018) who raise this worry for definitions of womanhood.

[8] See Mallon (2007: 157), Mason (2016: 844), Stoljar (1995), and Taylor (2013).

[9] Marques (2017: 18) voices a worry like this about Haslanger's account of gender.

[10] See Heyes (2000), Stein (1990), Stone (2004), and Witt (1995) for discussions of this sort of worry regarding gender and sexuality. Mason (2021) argues that social kinds are essentially mind-dependent.

[11] This argument is inspired by and framed in terms of Raven (2022).

[12] One might admit that the membership conditions *commonly associated* with a kind K are up to us, but deny that those conditions establish the essence of K. Indeed, the stipulated membership conditions may be seen as constituting the nominal, but not real, essence of K. See Passinksy (manuscript), Dembroff (2018), and Barnes (2020) for views on which common classificatory practices (do or should) come apart from actual membership conditions of a social kind.

[13] Though see Mackie (this volume?) who denies the entailment.

[14] Although not all debunking projects need aim at revealing a social essence where we thought there was a natural essence. One could debunk some claim or ideology by showing that there is in fact no such kind in the world at all. This sort of anti-realist debunking project would not entail any commitment to social essentialism. See Appiah (1996) and Glasgow (2009) for influential anti-realist accounts of race.

[15] See Jenkins (2016) for concerns over Haslanger's (2000) account wrongly excluding trans women from being women.

[16] See Mallon (2007) and Bach (2012). See Stubblefield (1995) for discussion about the tension between non-essentialist views of race and the goal of legitimating black solidarity.

[17] See Griffith (2018b) for a view on which some forms of social construction can be understood in terms of realization.