

On the Nature of Social Kinds*

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1 Kinds

A kind, according to Aristotle, is what makes an individual entity be what it is. I am what I am in virtue of belonging to the kind “human being”, and of having essential properties like the capacity to think and talk to other members of my species. These properties according to Aristotle are given by nature – not by us. Scientific knowledge is knowledge of these essential properties. Science aims at discovering the nature of things.

This Aristotelian conception of kinds is held only by a minority of contemporary philosophers. The term “kind” however is still widely in use, both in metaphysics and in the philosophy of science. The language of kinds is associated with the idea that the world comes already structured before we look at it. There are natural ways of classifying things, classifications that are independent of our theories.

Some philosophers identify natural kinds with the categories of our most advanced scientific theories. These “scientific” kinds, unlike other classifications, support robust and reliable inductive inferences.¹ Other philosophers in contrast emphasise essential properties, and the idea that natural kinds provide a fundamental, timeless classification of the entities that populate the universe. These philosophers associate natural kindhood with objective, universal order, emphasising their metaphysical rather than pragmatic function.² But beyond these disagreements most natural kind theorists share a realist orientation. The language of “kinds” is used in opposition with the language of “classes”, “sets”, classifications that are human-made, invented, possibly conventional.

Obviously many categories that we use have little to do with natural kinds. I am a philosophy professor, a Juventus fan, and an investor in safe government bonds for example. Some of these categories are scientifically relevant, and are used for explanation and prediction. And yet none of these kinds is “natural”: there would be no Juventus fans or cautious investors in a world where concepts like “football fan” or “owner of government bond” did not exist. This has been considered by many philosophers as deeply problematic: these *social* or *human kinds* seem to be dependent on human classificatory practices.³

There are different ways to construe this problem. The following thesis, I think, captures the concerns of many social theorists:

Difference thesis: unlike natural kinds, social kinds depend crucially on our attitudes towards them.

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1 The use of “scientific” instead of “natural kind” is advocated by Hacking (1991). See also Boyd (1991) and Dupré (1993).

2 See e.g. Ellis (2001), LaPorte (2004). For a survey of natural kind theories, cf. Bird and Tobin (2008).

3 See e.g. Barnes (1983), Ruben (1989), Searle (1995), Hacking (1995), Bloor (1997) – but the issue is older and the list could be longer. From now on I will use the terms “human” and “social kind” interchangeably.

The “attitudes” here are to be understood as *propositional attitudes* held by the members of a social group, such as collective beliefs, acceptance, or recognition.⁴ In a recent paper Muhammad Ali Khalidi (2013) proposes a useful distinction between two types of attitudes: (1) attitudes directed toward the individuals that belong to a social kind; and (2) attitudes directed toward the kind itself. For example: if we all believe that Mick Jagger is the leader of the Rolling Stones, then he is the band’s leader (type-1 attitude, directed toward an individual token). But we may also accept some conditions that define what being a band leader amounts to, in general; for instance, we may believe that if one of the members writes all the songs of the band then he or she is the leader. In this case, the attitude is directed toward the kind itself. As another example, consider the case of money: we consider a paper bill as money if and only if it has been issued by the Central Bank. The kind money is constituted by the attitude and the attitude is directed toward the kind, by specifying conditions for individual tokens to belong to that kind.

Some philosophers have noticed that there are social kinds that do not fit into any of these two cases.⁵ Paradigmatic examples are categories like “discriminated minority” and “inflated currency”. No attitude toward either tokens or kinds is necessary for them to exist. The reason is that they are *unintended consequences* of underlying mechanisms that work quite independently of anyone having any attitude toward the tokens or the kinds. Thus inflation and racism do not require any explicit collective acceptance or beliefs in order to exist. People can be totally unaware of being racists or, conversely, discriminated against. In fact they do not even need to have a concept or a term for racism in their vocabulary. In these cases, there does not seem to be any major difference between social and natural kinds: although the existence of these kinds presupposes the existence of human activities, no classificatory practice or categorization is required.

Still, there is general agreement that *some* social kinds are crucially dependent on collective attitudes – the attitudes are constitutive of their kindhood, so to speak. This is sufficient for the difference thesis to hold for a highly relevant portion of social reality: all that is required is that *some* social kinds are genuinely different from natural kinds. Cases that are routinely mentioned in support of the difference thesis include money, private property, prime ministers, professors, football clubs, and government bonds. For all these social entities collective attitudes are said to be crucial. Following an established terminology introduced by John Searle (1995), I will refer to these attitude-dependent kinds as *institutional* kinds.

The existence of institutional kinds has important philosophical and practical consequences, for the difference thesis puts realism into question. It implies that some kinds can only be invented, not discovered. It suggests that we cannot be wrong about institutional kinds: whatever fits the conditions that we take to be essential for being money *must be* money.⁶ In general, it suggests that the social sciences play a rather different role and have a different status from the natural sciences. Their role is not to discover but to describe and organize, perhaps occasionally even create a body of knowledge that belongs to our folk conception of reality.

These are bold claims that should not be taken lightly. In fact I think that they should not be taken at all: in this paper I will challenge the difference thesis, arguing that *dependence on collective propositional attitudes directed toward the kind itself is neither necessary nor sufficient for an institutional kind to exist*. I will argue that it is unnecessary and insufficient even for the core cases – like money – that are usually cited in support of the thesis. If I am right, then realism holds across the board. Institutional kinds are not radically different from natural kinds: their properties ought to be discovered, and people can be massively wrong about them. Folk concepts and institutional

4 There is a lively discussion in the philosophy of social action concerning the nature of collective attitudes (intentions, desires, beliefs), with some scholars defending reductionist accounts and others arguing for the irreducibility of collective intentions (see e.g. Tollefsen 2004). In this chapter I shall remain neutral on this issue and use the term “collective” in a generic fashion.

5 See Searle (1995), Thomasson (2003), Khalidi (2013).

6 For an explicit defence of these claims, see Ruben (1989) and Thomasson (2003). But many other philosophers of social science have held similar positions – see for example Hayek (1943: 8), Bloor (1997: 35).

kinds may diverge considerably, and social science is the best source of knowledge we have concerning the structure of social reality.

My challenge to the difference thesis will proceed as follows: in the next section the claim that social reality depends on propositional attitudes will be analysed in two separate parts, stating respectively that these attitudes are necessary and that they are sufficient for a token to belong to an institutional kind. In section 3 I shall reiterate the well-known point that the conditions that people accept for membership in a kind are often completely mistaken. But I shall also argue that this should lead us to abandon the difference thesis, contrary to what some philosophers have said. In section 4 I will explain why collective attitudes are unnecessary for kindhood. I will do so using the example of money, although the point applies more generally: institutional kinds are constituted by systems of actions and beliefs in equilibrium, and the conditions that philosophers identify for kind membership are just coordination devices that facilitate the convergence of such actions and beliefs. In section 5 I will elaborate this point to refute the sufficiency part of the thesis. Section 6 will wrap everything up with some reflections and conclusions.

2 The formula

What sort of claim am I going to challenge, exactly? In the previous section, following Khalidi (2013), I have distinguished two versions of the difference thesis. The first one says that unlike natural kinds institutional kinds are constituted by propositional attitudes directed toward their individual members.⁷ Formally, the claim can be represented as follows:

$$X \text{ is } K \leftrightarrow CA(X \text{ is } K).$$

In this formula X is a token entity that is a member of kind K . CA is a collective attitude like belief, acceptance, or recognition.

The second version of the difference thesis states that social kinds are constituted by attitudes toward the kinds themselves, or more precisely toward the conditions (properties) that make each individual X a member of K :⁸

$$X \text{ is } K \leftrightarrow [CA(X \text{ is } K \text{ if } C) \ \& \ C].$$

The notation is the same as before, except that now the attitude involves crucially a set of conditions C .⁹ The first formula arguably depends on the second one, because implicitly or explicitly the community members must apply criteria to decide which tokens are to be accepted as members of K and which ones are not. By stating the conditions C , the second formula simply makes the criteria explicit. As an example, take the paradigmatic case of money: a particular piece of paper is money if and only if we accept that in order to count as money a paper bill must be issued by the Central Bank, and this bill has been issued by the Central Bank. To simplify the discussion in the course of this paper I will refer primarily to the second version of this formula. This should have no significant consequences since everything that I will say will be applicable to the other version as well.

⁷ For ease of presentation, I will not keep saying “unlike natural kinds”, except when it is relevant.

⁸ The attitude in principle could be directed directly toward the properties that constitute the kind – for example, $CA(K \text{ has } P)$. In practice, social kinds are usually constituted by physical tokens (pieces of paper or metal, for instance) that satisfy certain special conditions. Hence the formula $CA(X \text{ is } K \text{ if } C)$. This version is shaped on Searle’s (1995) formula for constitutive rules: “ X counts as Y in C ” – the main difference is that C is a condition of satisfaction rather than a domain condition as in Searle’s formula.

⁹ Notice that to accept the conditions is not sufficient, in itself, to guarantee that X is K : it must also be the case that the C s are instantiated.

Notice that the difference thesis does not merely say that institutional kinds depend on collective beliefs or attitudes. The claim is much more specific: the attitude in the formula must be directed toward K, by stating conditions of kindhood, i.e. by specifying the properties that make X belong to K.¹⁰ This is important because the simple dependence thesis (the claim that social kinds depend on collective beliefs) distinguishes social from natural kinds in a trivial way only: to say that propositional attitudes figure among the properties or mechanisms that constitute social kinds does not challenge realism. Social science deals with phenomena that depend on mental states, just as biology deals with phenomena that depend on chemical substances. This is rather trivial and philosophically insignificant in itself. A conventionalist or constructionist account makes a much more interesting and contentious claim: it says that institutional kinds are constituted by beliefs *about the kinds themselves*.

For analytical purposes it will be useful to break the formula in two parts (Guala 2010: 248-9). The first part states that collective acceptance is *necessary* for social kindhood:

$$X \text{ is } K \rightarrow [CA(X \text{ is } K \text{ if } C) \ \& \ C].$$

The second part states that collective acceptance is jointly *sufficient*, with the realization of C, to make X an institutional entity of type K:

$$[CA(X \text{ is } K \text{ if } C) \ \& \ C] \rightarrow X \text{ is } K.$$

In the sections that follow I will challenge them both, starting from the necessity statement.

3 Necessity

As we have seen, there are clear examples of social kinds that do not require collective attitudes (inflation, unemployment). So is this part of the argument redundant? No, because I want to argue for a stronger claim here. I want to argue that collective attitudes are unnecessary even for those cases – institutional kinds – that are usually considered paradigmatic for the difference thesis. The point is not merely that there are exceptions, but rather that there are no “core” cases at all.

I will proceed in two steps: first, I will argue that we can all be wrong about the nature of *any* institutional kind. This suggests that our collective attitudes are strictly speaking irrelevant for the existence of kinds. In fact – and this is my second step – I will argue that the conditions C that are usually taken to be necessary for kindhood are actually redundant, and can be dispensed with. For this reason, what people believe or accept regarding K is not constitutive of institutional reality.

The first point is far from new. It is a philosophical and sociological platitude that people are often unaware of the true conditions of existence of institutional kinds. In fact they sometimes hold massively incorrect beliefs about them. People may believe that the king is divinely ordained, or that money is anchored with a commodity base (the bullion stored in the safe of the Central Bank for example). According to John Searle, for example,

the process of creation of institutional facts may proceed without the participants being conscious that it is happening according to this form. . . . In the very evolution of the institution [of, say, money] the participants need not be consciously aware of the form of the collective intentionality by which they are imposing functions on objects. In the course of consciously buying, selling, exchanging, etc., they may simply evolve institutional facts. Furthermore, in extreme cases they may accept the imposition of function only because of

¹⁰ This is similar to the distinction between the “Object-General” and the “Object-Specific Thesis” drawn by Edouard Machery in his chapter.

some related theory, which may not even be true. They may believe that it is money only if it is “backed by gold” or that it is marriage only if it is sanctified by God or that so and so is the king only because he is divinely authorized. (Searle 1995: 47-48)

Searle’s caution is motivated in part by a desire to hedge the acceptance theory from cheap counterexamples. Clearly many institutional facts are not consciously accepted as such—at least by most of us, most of the time—so the very notion of collective attitude must be formulated in such a way as to account for this fact. Collective acceptance must be turned into a weaker concept.

One solution is to interpret “acceptance” broadly, to include any kind of implicit agreement with a rule. Since any pattern or practice can be described by a rule, there is always a rule that can be said to be implicitly “accepted” or “recognized” by the members of the relevant community. But now the thesis sounds suspiciously tautological, and the explanatory weight of the propositional attitudes becomes dubious. One could say that two gorillas are husband and wife, for instance, because their behaviour fits the rule “X and Y are married if they groom each other”. But no propositional attitude toward the kind “marriage” plays any substantial role in the explanation of gorilla behaviour, and supporters of the difference thesis surely should not be happy with a cheap victory of this sort.¹¹

4 Coordination

To say that collective attitudes and conditions of acceptance do not play an essential role in the constitution of institutional kinds is not to say that they are useless, or that they never play any role in the maintenance of the kinds themselves. Such a statement would be exaggerated and ungenerous to those philosophers who have correctly identified collective attitudes as an important cogwheel in the creation and maintenance of social reality. But what is their role exactly?

The role of collective attitudes – when they do play a role – is causal. Accepting a set of conditions C facilitates the formation of mutually consistent beliefs about the behaviour of a large number of individuals seeking coordination. Another way to put it is to say that the conditions we impose for the membership of institutional kinds are essentially *coordination devices*.

Why do we accept worthless paper bills in exchange for valuable goods or services? I accept euro bills as payment because I am confident that I will be able to use them later to purchase other goods. The people who will take my bills will do so for the same reason: they will take them as payment because they will believe that others will take them, and so forth. Of course in principle different entities could fulfil the function of medium of exchange; but the process works a lot more smoothly if we all accept the same things, and we all share the same beliefs concerning what will be accepted in the future.

A primary role of the Central Bank is to ensure coordination among traders by enforcing a monopoly on the issuing of money. The Bank prints bills that will be used by everyone, because everyone believes that the others believe – and so forth – that they will continue to be used as media of trade. If an entity X (a paper bill) fulfils the condition C (being issued by the Central Bank) then it counts as money. But this means only that being issued by the Central Bank makes us very confident that the bill will be accepted in the future.

The whole thing looks suspiciously magical. Why should C matter? What is so special with a piece of paper that carries the stamp of the Central Bank? In fact there is more to say about money, a lot of properties or conditions that philosophers usually fail to mention but that are absolutely crucial to

11 Thomasson (2003) endorses a “non-cognitivist” interpretation of collective attitudes similar to the one sketched in the text, and uses it to defend infallibilism about social kinds. I have criticized the infallibilism of Thomasson and others (e.g. Ruben 1989) in Guala (2010).

understand the nature of this institution. But to know what these properties are we must turn to social science, and in particular to economics.¹²

The conditions C merely have a facilitating role. To function properly, a medium of exchange must fulfil other conditions that are *not* included in C. The key one as we have seen is that everyone must believe that others will want to hold the paper bills in the future. But this belief should better not hang up in the air: people must have good reasons (incentives) to hold currency. The state plays an important role at this point: it can guarantee a certain level of demand for the currency in the future, via taxation. If the state will only accept paper bills issued by the Central Bank as payment, then we can be confident that in the future people will have to hold at least some official currency for tax purposes. This is true of course only to the extent that the state is strong, stable, and will have the means to collect taxes. So, unsurprisingly, the strength of a currency is strictly linked with the political strength of the state.

The state collects paper bills via taxation, and puts them back into the economy by paying salaries to the employees of the public sector. If they meddle with the latter part of the cycle, as we know, governments and central banks can devalue the currency, creating inflation. In extreme cases of hyper-inflation a currency may even become worthless paper. This is because in order to function properly a currency must be a reliable *store of value*. Standard economics textbooks remind us that the store of value condition is a fundamental presupposition for a currency to work as a medium of exchange.¹³ And this will be true only if the quantity of currency is relatively stable. So it seems that fulfilling conditions C is neither necessary nor sufficient. A cigarette can be money even though clearly it has not been issued by the Central Bank, and a bill that has been issued by the Central Bank may fail to work as medium of exchange.

5 Sufficiency

We now have the conceptual tools to debunk the second plank of the collective attitude formula. Notice that the store of value property – and other properties that back it up, like the stability of the quantity of money – is not included in C. But then being issued by the Central Bank is not what makes a token bill a member of the kind “money”. The conditions C merely coordinate our beliefs that individual paper bills fulfilling certain conditions will be accepted as means of payment in the future. And even this coordination function can only be performed under certain happy conditions. Money is constituted by a system of actions and beliefs about actions in equilibrium, not by arbitrary conventions concerning the issuing of paper bills.

Of course people may still collectively decide to *call* the bills that are issued by the Central Bank “money” even though the equilibrium has collapsed. Imagine a currency that has been completely devalued: is it still money? In a superficial sense it is. Perhaps when people see a bill, they say: “it’s money”, even though they do not actually use it for trade. Suppose that they prefer to use cigarettes as a medium of exchange. When asked what is that thing they hold in their pockets, they say: “this is a cigarette”, not “this is money”. But for all interesting purposes, the cigarettes are money and the bill is just paper.

The point is that one thing is to be recognised as money in a system of folk classification; quite another is to *be* money. The former does not imply the latter, contrary to what the sufficiency thesis suggests. Folk classificatory practices are in principle quite irrelevant. What matters is not what type of attitude people have toward a certain class of entities (the conditions they *think* the entities ought to satisfy in order to belong to that class), but what they do with them in the course of social interaction. The relevant attitudes, in other words, are directed toward the attitudes of other people.

12 Philosophers sometimes state bluntly that economics currently lacks a theory of money – which is plainly false and unnecessarily offensive. Smit et al. (2011) explain in non-technical terms what money is, from the point of view of economic theory, and how the economic account relates to philosophical accounts based on collective attitudes.

¹³ Cf. for example Dornbusch and Fischer (1994: 374).

In a recent paper Frank Hindriks and I (2013) have argued that general terms like “money”, “private property”, “professor” etc. simply summarise bundles of actions or strategies that are associated with each term. These actions are equilibrium solutions of complex games of social interaction. One such action for example is described by a rule saying that “if the bill has been issued by the Central Bank, then you should accept it as payment”. Another is that “if you have a land registry certificate in your name, then you can resell your house”, and so forth. In simple coordination problems, a single rule will suffice (“if you are in Britain then drive on the left”). But when the actions are numerous and complex, it is useful to cluster and subsume under the umbrella of a single theoretical term: a new concept (money, private property, professorship) is introduced for economy of thought.¹⁴ For example:

(1) If a house is registered in your name at the Land Registry office, then it is your property.

The concept “property” in turn implies a large set of actions (things that you can do with your property):

(2) If a house is your property, then you can sell it, refurbish, rent it out, destroy it, etc.

The “etc.” at the end of the list is important: one reason why we use the term “property” is that it summarises all the things that you can and cannot do with a house that is registered in your name. When the list is finite and short, as in the case of traffic, there is no need to introduce a new term. (That is why we do not have a special term for the institution of driving on the left-hand side of the road.) But in general it is possible to formulate a set of rules without using the theoretical term. In the case of property we can eliminate the theoretical term like this:

(3) If a house is registered in your name at the Land Registry office, then you can sell it, refurbish, rent it out, destroy it, etc.

Other social terms like money are also dispensable:

(1') If a bill has been issued by the Central Bank then it is money.

(2') If it is money then it can be used to purchase commodities, it can be deposited in a bank account, it can be lent to a friend, etc.

Eliminating “money” we obtain:

(3') If a bill has been issued by the Central Bank then it can be used to purchase commodities, it can be deposited in a bank account, it can be lent to a friend, etc.

So to the extent that theoretical terms like “property”, “money”, or “professor” refer to something real, they refer to profiles of actions. The real content is not in the C conditions (“issued by the Central Bank”): it is in the strategies (“accept it as payment”) that are associated with the theoretical term (“money”). The kind money ultimately is nothing but this set of actions, and the related set of expectations. The C conditions are useful in so far as they simplify our decisions: they are *coordination devices* that help us identify quickly and without lengthy inspection an appropriate set of actions in the given circumstances. (Should I accept a piece of paper as payment? Yes, because it has been issued by the Central Bank.) But to focus on the C conditions as what makes something a

¹⁴ The idea of treating constitutive formulae as rules for the introduction of theoretical terms was originally developed by Hindriks (2009). In Guala and Hindriks (2013) we integrate this idea with game-theoretic notions of equilibrium and correlation device.

member of K is a perceptual mistake. It mistakes the coordination device for the system of actions and expectations that a social institution is.¹⁵

In some cases, of course, people can dispense with a coordination device. If they endorse a correct theory of the kind in question – of the properties and mechanisms that make X a member of K – then knowledge of these properties will be sufficient for kindhood. But this is hardly a relief for the difference thesis, because the collective attitude toward the kind itself becomes redundant. To realize why this is the case, let us consider a simplified theory of money. Suppose that moneyhood depends exclusively on the power of the state to levy taxes. Suppose that knowledge of this power is sufficient to convince every citizen that the bills issued by the Central Bank will continue to be requested by others in the future. If everybody believes that the use of a certain currency (X) will be enforced by the state, then X is money:

CA[X will be used to pay taxes] → X is money.

The formula only says that people ought to have a certain attitude toward future uses of X. It does not say that they ought to collectively accept a theory of what constitutes money. Of course they might endorse such a theory, in which case the formula could be expanded as follows:

CA[(X is money if and only if X will be used to pay taxes) and (X will be used to pay taxes)]
→ X is money.

The expanded formula is implied by the former, compact one. But notice that the first proposition between brackets (X is money if and only if X will be needed to pay taxes) is redundant: the rest of the formula already states the conditions for X to be money: X is money if people believe that it will be used to pay taxes. The compact formula does not support the difference thesis, however, because it does not involve any attitude toward the kind itself. It does not challenge realism, and it does not distinguish institutional from natural kinds along any philosophically interesting dimension. Endorsing a correct theory of money certainly helps in a number of ways, but it is not sufficient to constitute money.

6 A farewell to the difference thesis

I have argued that holding propositional attitudes (of collective acceptance, belief, or recognition) toward an institutional kind is neither necessary nor sufficient for the existence of the kind itself. It is unnecessary, because people may ignore the true instantiation conditions (what really makes X belong to K) and therefore may be wrong about the nature of the kind. It is insufficient, because being aware of the true conditions does not guarantee that the token really is an instance of K. There are other properties that constitute institutional kindhood, and such properties do not involve collective attitudes toward the kind itself. The conditions C typically play a coordination role that – albeit useful and important in a number of cases – has scarce ontological relevance.

If the arguments I have presented are sound, then it follows that the differences between institutional and natural kinds are less important than many philosophers have thought. The characteristic properties of institutional kinds ought to be discovered, just as in the natural realm. Membership in an institutional kind, moreover, is not a purely conventional matter. Conventions do play a role, but only in the choice of the devices that coordinate actions and beliefs. The choice of these devices may be arbitrary, within certain limits, but it is not essential for the constitution of institutional kinds.

¹⁵ Mallon (2003) discusses the role that social kinds play as devices to stabilize behaviour (“coordination devices”, in the language that I have used in this chapter).

The truly important properties – those that turn a token piece of paper into money, for example – are not conventional at all: they involve facts like people’s beliefs about the likelihood that others will accept paper bills in exchange for goods and services. These beliefs in turn depend on hard facts like the number of bills circulating in the economy, or mechanisms and dispositions like the enforcement power of the state. Collective attitudes toward the kind itself are neither necessary nor sufficient for the constitution of money.

There is a weaker, trivial sense in which conventionalism holds at a purely linguistic level. We cannot be wrong in *calling* X money, if X fulfils all the conditions C that we accept as sufficient for the sort of things that the folk call “money”. Our choice of language, or how we classify things for the purposes of everyday dealings and communications, is indeed a conventional matter. But what *is* money – the nature of K and membership in K – is not conventional at all. Fulfilling the conditions C that we take to be essential for moneyhood does not turn X into an instance money, because other conditions must be fulfilled. And, conversely, many things that do not fulfil the collectively accepted conditions may indeed be money.

Let us bid farewell to the difference thesis, then, without any regrets, because what counts as an institutional kind is independent of our propositional attitudes toward the kind itself.

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