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SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

Mari Mikkola

1 Introduction

Social ontology is the philosophical study of the nature and properties of the social world. As a field of philosophy, it investigates the nature of social groups and collective intentionality, as well as the nature and existence of money, corporations, institutions, race, gender, artifacts, and the law (among other things). Many paradigm objects that social ontology investigates are said to be socially constructed in some sense. Bluntly put: they are said to exist and have the natures that they do by virtue of what we – social agents – ascribe and attribute to those objects. For instance, many feminist philosophers take gender to be constitutively constructed: in defining what it is (for example) to be a woman, we must make reference to social factors rather than anatomy, such as one’s position in a social hierarchy or self-identification. There are many ways in which social construction works and how the social world ontologically depends on us. *Prima facie* it seems that mental states (both individual and collective) play a role in setting up social kinds or providing the ‘glue’ necessary to bind entities into social kinds. This may include forms of collective agreement and institutionalized social conventions. Alternatively, some hold that social kinds, entities, and practices are produced and reproduced in virtue of some functions that they putatively serve. For instance, a functional explanation of a social practice explains why that practice exists by making reference to the purpose or needs served by the practice (Kincaid 2006).

In many social ontological accounts, language plays a seemingly key role in explicating how social kinds come into being and are set up. For instance, crudely put, in defining the term ‘landlord’ as “a person who rents a property owned”, we set up the conditions under which someone counts as a landlord – that is, with ‘our’ conceptual schemes and linguistic usage we fix what it is to be a landlord. Although much of social ontology takes language somehow to be central to how the social world is set up, surprisingly little has been written about the precise role of language in social ontology and how we should understand the constructive force of language. Here I will address this issue. More specifically, although the idea that social categories ontologically depend on language in some sense is widely accepted, the precise explication of how social objects metaphysically depend on language has received much less focused attention – and it is this issue that I aim to address here. In order to do so, we must distinguish two more detailed questions: (1) How is it that language figures in explicating the *existence* of social entities? (2) How is it that language shapes the *nature* of social entities? This chapter offers some tentative answers to these questions hence providing a clarification of the connection between language and sociality. Doing so will

hopefully advance our understanding of philosophical methods that social ontologists can fruitfully make use of. In what follows, I will largely focus on feminist discussions in social ontology that deal with gender terms and kinds by way of illustration.

2 The Existence of Social Kinds

Prima facie the idea that the existence of social entities and kinds depends on ‘our’ conceptual schemes, language use, or ‘discourse’ is puzzling: how is it that we can (bluntly put) call things into being? Just saying that something is the case does not make it the case. For instance, consider the example of being a landlord. Just stipulating the conditions of landlordiness does not make it the case that landlords magically come into being. Radical linguistic constructivism – the view that everything is socially constructed all the way down via language or discourse – looks highly implausible and questionable. Instead, it seems that the role language does and ought to play is more descriptive: it is a tool with which to articulate and make explicit ways in which reality is arranged thereby providing apt and accurate depictions of it. Consider this analogously to the task of (non-social) metaphysics and ontology: on some prominent contemporary accounts, it is about limning the structure of reality by “figuring out the right categories [carved in reality’s joints] for describing the world” (Sider 2011, 1). The role of language is to articulate how we *discover* the world to be, not to *construct* it to our liking.

However, much of social ontology takes language (broadly understood) to have precisely such a constructive role. How should we understand this? I want to suggest that there may be a rather easy way to spell this out, contra first appearances, at least relative to existence claims pertaining to paradigm social entities. But in order to see why the existence of social categories such as gender might be disputed, consider first some postmodern critiques and how to deal with the term ‘woman’. It is a widely accepted feminist claim that gender injustice is not incidental and individual, but systematic and structural – it targets women *as women*. Feminism thus seemingly lends itself to identity politics: a form of political mobilization based on membership in women’s social kind, where shared experiences or traits delimit kind membership (Heyes 2000, 2012). However, the past few decades have allegedly witnessed a feminist identity crisis (Alcoff 1988). Feminist politics presumes the existence of a women’s social kind founded on some category-wide common traits or experiences. But as many feminists have noted, no such transcultural and transhistorical commonality exists because our axes of identity (e.g. gender, race, ability, class) are not discrete and separable. In her classic work, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler takes issue with feminist identity politics (to name but one issue in a rich work). It appears as if the term ‘woman’ has some unitary cross-cultural and transhistorical meaning and that the term picks out some determinate group of people with an identity-defining feature in common. However, this picture is mistaken and the concept *woman* has no stable meaning. Instead, ‘woman’ is “a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification” (Butler 1999, 43). (For a similar argument that rejects ‘woman’ has some fixed and invariant meaning, see Cornell 1993.) The feminist picture of gender (for Butler) in no meaningful sense describes reality; rather, it is an unwitting *product* of feminist politics in its effort to represent the interests of certain political subjects (namely, of women). In aiming to represent women’s interests, feminism constructs its own political subject via accepted conceptual schemes and linguistic ‘discourse’. Hence, any notion of womanhood that is used to capture the class of women unhelpfully masks women’s diversity. It “necessarily produce[s] factionalization...Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary” (Butler 1991, 160). Gender concepts articulated by feminist theorists turn out to articulate a set of “unspoken

normative requirements” (Butler 1999, 9) that those hoping to gain feminist political representation *should* satisfy. Thus, they prescribe and produce a supposedly correct picture of womanhood despite aiming to offer non-normative descriptions of womanhood – if you like, aiming to limn the structure of our gendered reality. Butler takes this to be a feature of terms denoting social identity categories. The underlying presumption appears to be that such terms can never be used in a non-ideological way (Moi 1999, 43). They will always prescribe some conditions that ought to be satisfied since all processes of drawing categorical distinctions involve normative commitments that involve the exercise of social power (Witt 1995). Those who do not conform to the normative picture of womanhood risk being alienated and excluded from feminist politics altogether. Nicholson captures this thought nicely: “the idea of [the term] ‘woman’ as unitary operates as a policing force which generates and legitimizes certain practices, experiences, etc., and curtails and delegitimizes others” (1998, 293).

Butler’s aim is not, however, merely to critique prevalent conceptions of *woman*. Her argument is stronger than this: every definition of *woman* will be insidiously normative and thus politically problematic. This is because, as noted above, terms denoting social identity categories cannot be used in non-normative and merely descriptive ways according to Butler. The mistake is not that feminists provided the incorrect definition of *woman*. Rather, their mistake was to attempt to define womanhood in a putatively descriptive manner to begin with – a task that Butler takes to be linguistically impossible since normativity is (for her) built into terms denoting identity categories. In fact, Butler thinks it is also metaphysically impossible to provide a definition of *woman* because (for her) gender is performative. It is not “a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow”; rather, gender comes into being through “a *stylized repetition of [habitual] acts*” (Butler 1999, 179). Gender is something that one does in wearing gender-coded clothing, in walking and sitting in gender-coded ways, in styling one’s hair in gender-coded manner and in desiring sexually the opposite sex/gender. Repeatedly engaging in ‘feminizing’ and ‘masculinizing’ acts congeals gender, thereby making people falsely think of gender as an identity that they somehow ‘naturally’ possess. This opens up the possibility to undermine gender dualism by subverting the way one ‘does’ one’s gender. Subsequently, feminists should actively resist defining womanhood, thereby opening it up for new, more emancipatory conceptions. Moreover, there is no ‘doer’ behind the deed as Butler puts it. Strictly speaking, there are *no* women or men; only habitually performed gendering acts.¹ To think that gender is an identity that we possess and something that we are (rather something that we do) is a view that earlier feminists simply got wrong and it created a problematically exclusionary essentialism about gender.

This type of challenge to the existence of gender has been immensely influential in feminist theory. Until the early- to mid-2000s it was not uncommon to hear philosophers proclaim that gender isn’t real or to be asked as a feminist philosopher whether one thought gender *really* exists. To challenge this type of gender skepticism, or error theory about gender, feminist philosophers typically argue that manifest gender differences are real in the sense of being part of our social realities, though not carved in nature’s joints. One task of feminist social ontology, then, is to show that classifications central to feminist concerns are in important ways *constitutively constructed* (Haslanger 1995): for instance, in defining womanhood we must make reference to social factors, not anatomy. Of course, which social factors fix gender is an ongoing debate within feminist philosophy (for an overview, see Mikkola 2017). Alternatively, one could appeal to a form of causal construction, *discursive construction*: gendered beings are the way they are, at least to a substantial extent, because of what is attributed to them on the basis of ‘our’ underlying gendered conceptual schemes (for more on discursive construction, see Haslanger 1995, 99). In fact, this is close to how Butler understands the social constructedness of sex. In addition to arguing against identity

politics and for gender performativity, Butler holds that distinguishing *biological sex* from *social gender* is unintelligible. For her, both are socially constructed:

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.

(Butler 1999, 10–11)

The idea that sex is a social construct, for Butler, boils down to the view that our sexed bodies are also performative and, so, they have “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute [their] reality” (1999, 173). Prima facie, this implausibly implies that sexed bodies do not have independent existence and that if gendering activities ceased, so would physical bodies. This is not Butler’s claim; rather, her position is that bodies viewed as the material foundations on which gender is constructed are themselves constructed *as if* they provide such material foundations (Butler 1993). Cultural conceptions about gender figure in “the very apparatus of production whereby sexes themselves are established” (Butler 1999, 11).

For Butler, sexed bodies never exist outside of social meanings and how we understand gender shapes how we understand sex (1999, 139). Sexed bodies are not empty matter on which gender is constructed and sex categories are not picked out on the basis of objective features of the world. Instead, our sexed bodies are discursively constructed: they are the way they are, at least to a substantial extent, because of what is attributed to sexed bodies and how they are classified. Sex assignment – calling someone female or male – is normative (Butler 1993, 1). As Butler sees it, when a doctor proclaims at birth ‘It’s a boy/ girl’, they are not making a descriptive claim but a normative pronouncement with illocutionary, performative force. In effect, the doctor’s utterance makes infants into girls or boys – it counts as an instance of sexing. This is a normative activity in the sense of imposing a (normative) order and framework at birth onto children. So the proclamation does not report or describe some existing state of affairs, but rather constructs a state of affairs, because certain norms come to be ascribed to and imposed on people. We, then, engage in activities that make it seem as if sexes naturally come in two and that being female or male is an objective feature of reality, rather than being a consequence of certain constitutive acts (that is, rather than being performative). And this is what Butler means in saying that physical bodies never exist outside cultural and social meanings, and that sex is as socially constructed as gender. She does not deny that physical bodies exist in a material sense. But, she takes our understanding of this existence to be a *product* of social conditioning: social conditioning makes the existence of physical bodies intelligible to us by discursively constructing sexed bodies through certain constitutive acts, like illocutionary ‘sexing’ speech acts.

The above elaborated some prominent social constructivist accounts of sex and gender, where language plays a performative role. In other words, some social agents have the power to bring social entities and states of affairs into being with language (for instance) given their institutional roles; just think of the doctor’s power to ‘sex’ new-born babies that positions them in gendered structures with wide-ranging and long-term effects on self-identities, self-presentations, and available social roles.² Discursive construction works in similar ways in that ‘our’ classificatory schemes

may do more than just map preexisting [sic] groups of individuals; rather our attributions have the power to both establish and reinforce groupings which may eventually come to ‘fit’ the classification. In such cases, classificatory schemes function more like a script than a map.

(Haslanger 1995, 99)

These sorts of performative accounts, however, are on the face of it difficult to square with the idea that language can *more or less* aptly represent or describe social reality. In a sense, it becomes

difficult to critique the doctor's proclamation that sexes infants as being simply false, if in saying that x is the case the doctor is able to make x the case. The worry with social ontological accounts that afford language too much constructive power is that it becomes impossible to challenge some views as being simply mistaken. Although language use and conceptual schemes conceivably have much performative power, social ontologists should retain some more descriptive and declarative role for language as well.

With this in mind, there may be a more straightforward alternative way to fix the existence of many social entities through language. I have in mind a more recent idea of 'easy ontology' as articulated by Amie Thomasson. The basic point is that fully meaningful and well-specified existence questions are straightforwardly answerable by "making use of our conceptual competence" (Thomasson 2015, 20). On this approach,

Answers to certain disputed ontological questions can be reached easily by starting from an uncontroversial truth (e.g., 'the cups and saucers are equinumerous' or 'snow is white') and reasoning by what seem like trivial steps (to 'the number of cups equals the number of saucers' or 'the proposition that snow is white is true') to reach ontological conclusions ('there are numbers'; 'there are propositions').

(Thomasson 2015, 21)

This allows us to resolve existence questions of the kind 'Do numbers exist?' conceptually by starting with a conceptual truth and making some easy inferences. The role of philosophy is to engage in conceptual analysis and to make explicit how conceptual truths license inferences, where this type of analysis involves removing conceptual confusion and proposing discursive revisions. The background framework for this type of analysis comes from Carnap's view that there are two ways to ask existence questions. Internal questions are about whether certain entities or kinds exist within 'our' language or linguistic framework. This includes questions such as 'Are there any prime numbers between 780 and 790?', which can be answered analytically given 'our' linguistic framework – they can be answered using the rules of use for number terms within the framework of arithmetic. External existence questions by contrast are formulated in highly general ways, such as 'Are there numbers?'. Questions of this form, however, are ill-formed pseudo-questions and rather should be reinterpreted as implicitly pragmatic questions about which linguistic framework to accept as relevant: "we have to make the choice whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression in the framework in question" (Carnap 1956, 207). To put the point somewhat differently, internal questions are asked within some relevant framework, whereas external questions pertain to "the existence or reality of the system of entities as a whole" (Carnap 1956, 206). Subsequently, answering external questions hinges on pragmatic considerations about which linguistic framework we ought to adopt (if any). Philosophers' work consists in "constructing linguistic frameworks and making practical decisions about which framework to adopt for which purposes" (Thomasson 2015, 33), rather than undertaking an examination that supposedly affords them with some special ontological insight into reality.

To sum up: internal existence questions may be answered analytically, while external existence questions – in being ill-formed pseudo-questions – can be made intelligible only if we understand them pragmatically as being questions about what linguistic framework we ought to adopt. If metaphysical questions are considered to be 'hard' (rather than easily resolvable by trivial analytical means), they are to be considered external questions. But then we should understand metaphysical existence questions as pragmatic questions if they are to be sensible at all. With respect to gender, these considerations yield the following. Depending on how we frame our existence questions about gender, they may be either internal, in which case we can answer them easily. For instance, start with the uncontroversial truth 'Women are human beings' and the trivial inference 'The

proposition that women are human beings is true'. This then on the 'easy' approach yields an ontological conclusion: there are women. We may be able to deal with many existence questions in social ontology in this manner, which demystifies them. Alternatively, existence questions about gender may be treated as external, in which case those questions will be ill-formed pseudo-questions. Given the Carnapian distinction, a question of the form 'Are there women?' will be an external one and hence a pseudo-question. In order to render the question sensible, we ought to conclude that this question cannot sensibly be answered by purely metaphysical considerations and rather is a pragmatic question about which linguistic framework (if any) to adopt. In this case, resolving the existence question about gender turns on a choice between different conceptual schemes and linguistic frameworks – for instance, given feminist political considerations we have *prima facie* good grounds to reject frameworks advanced by radical linguistic constructivists, which end up being skeptical about the existence or 'materiality' of gender. After all, material gendered conditions that are oppressive to women are not linguistic constructs, and politically effective feminism cannot alter those conditions merely by affecting extant conceptual schemes or 'discourse'. If we understand existence questions as external, answering them hinges on pragmatic considerations about which linguistic framework is the most fruitful one. In order to engage in this type of inquiry, social ontologists need methods that can explicate the *nature* of social kinds. In other words, the 'easy' gender ontology tells us nothing about what women (or other social entities) are like – it just tells us that they exist. This conclusion undercuts the skeptical move of holding that since social entities are not 'carved in nature's joints' and because they are essentially derivative, they do not really exist or they exist in some mode different to (say) numbers. 'Easy' ontology offers a way for social ontologists to resist these moves; but in order to say something about the nature of social entities the easy approach cannot help us further. For this task, I will turn next to metalinguistic negotiation.

3 The Nature of Social Kinds

Social ontology typically accepts that conceptual schemes or 'discourse' can shape the social world in non-trivial and significant ways. Language and our linguistic repertoire are important parts of the social world. Social power relations shape meanings, how we (can) think and talk, and prevalent conceptual schemes, which, in turn, affect the way social entities and kinds are set up. Some ways to think and talk about reality are clearly defective. These include:

cognitive defects (that undermine our ability to reason properly), moral or political defects (that undermine moral or political values of various sorts), theoretical defects (that undermine progress within some theoretical field), or semantic defects (where the semantic value is incoherent, incomplete, or missing).

(Cappelen and Plunkett 2020, 3; see also Cappelen 2018)

For instance, take the concept of *family*: traditionally conceived, the content of this concept includes a mother, a father, heterosexual marriage contract, and children who are biologically related to the parents. But this conception is defective at least in cognitive, political, and semantic ways and generates a failure to recognize less traditional arrangements: e.g. same-sex unions, adoptive parents, parenting one's partner's biological children, non-married couples, childfree unions, etc. In order to improve our linguistic resources and repertoire to better (so to speak) limn the structure of the social reality, metalinguistic negotiation has more recently been advanced as an important methodological tool that focuses on the pragmatics of what is being said. Most basically, (normative) metalinguistic negotiation denotes a dispute "in which speakers each use (rather than mention) a term to advocate for a normative view about how that term should be used" (Plunkett 2015, 832).

This is not equivalent to speakers merely talking past one another. In such disputes the interlocutors are not genuinely expressing a disagreement, unlike in cases of metalinguistic negotiation. A simple case of equivocation is where speakers use the same term to refer to two different concepts (e.g. ‘bank’ to denote a river bank and a financial institution). Another case that isn’t metalinguistic negotiation in the normative sense would be a dispute about whether someone counts as tall. For instance, given the national height averages, Sally who is 170 cm might be tall for a Finn but short for a Dutch. However, if Jo proclaims “Sally is tall” and Jane responds claiming “Sally is not tall”, we do not have a normative metalinguistic disagreement about how one ought to employ the term ‘tall’ – rather, for Plunkett (2015) this would be a descriptive metalinguistic dispute and issue about word usage or meaning. However, metalinguistic negotiations proper are not descriptive disputes. They are about what a word *should* mean, or how it should be used (Plunkett 2015, 838). Or as Thomasson puts it: “unlike paradigmatic verbal disputes, many cases of metalinguistic negotiation involve disputes very much worth having” (2017, 12). By way of example, she notes the following (among others): whether the Oklahoma City bombing counts as terrorism, whether waterboarding counts as torture, and whether certain extreme performances count as art. The point here is that we are not merely engaging in disputes about the terms ‘terrorism’, ‘torture’, or ‘art’. These are *worldly* disputes, where the interlocutors are not merely offering competing descriptions of the world, but are rather “advocating for different conceptual schemes with different impact on our way of life” (Thomasson 2017, 20). Thinking back to easy ontology then: when we are dealing with external existence questions that essentially hinge on pragmatically choosing a conceptual scheme, we are engaged in pragmatically advocating for one conceptual scheme that reflects some way of life over another scheme and way of life. Such a debate is not merely a superficial verbal one, but a substantive dispute. This is because normative issues about concept choices being important do not “depend on the way in which speakers argue about those issues. Rather, it depends on the content of those issues” (Plunkett 2015, 844).

In order to address the issue of which conceptual schemes we ought to advance, social ontologists could engage in ‘conceptual engineering’ and ‘conceptual ethics’ (Burgess and Plunkett 2013; Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett 2020). These projects can be characterized as follows:

Conceptual engineering is the business of changing existing concepts and devising new ones. Conceptual ethics is the business of evaluating existing concepts and ways of talking, along with newly engineered ones, and making normative judgments as to whether they are fit for purpose. Jointly they promise reform through innovation and selection of how we think and talk in the pursuit of various ends – whether moral ends, practical ends, or alethic ends.

(Braddon-Mitchell 2020, 79)

The idea is to engage in some conceptual innovation so that we can meaningfully revise what we mean in order to gain better tools with which to think and talk. Conceptual ethics is not just about how we should understand some concept, but also about whether we should use some concept at all: whether we should be eliminativists or nihilists about some concept. If our conceptual repertoire aims to track some non-existent entities, we should no longer make use of that repertoire (nihilism). This might be the case with gender terms if approaches like Butler’s are to be preferred. But as I suggested above, ‘easy’ ontology offers *prima facie* ways to dispel nihilism in the social realm, at least relative to gender. Then again, even if our conceptual repertoire putatively tracks something that exists, we may have good normative grounds to stop talking in those terms and be eliminativists.

Within feminist social ontology, Sally Haslanger’s ameliorative approach to gender is conceivably the most well-known putative instance of conceptual engineering. Haslanger (2012) spells out different ways to answer questions of the kind ‘What is x?’. First, a conceptual analysis aims

to articulate ‘our’ ordinary concepts by consulting native speakers’ intuitions – this spells out ‘our’ manifest concepts. This type is introspective in character and can *prima facie* be done from the philosopher’s armchair. Second, a descriptive approach focuses on our terms’ extensions, and which kinds our language use tracks – it aims to clarify ‘our’ operative concepts by looking at how language users in fact use certain terms, which should tell us something about their intension or meaning. This type of analysis should be conducted typically via empirical means. Neither conceptual nor descriptive projects, however, tackle more normative issues: how one ought to think and talk; and what role the speaker’s social position plays in generating meanings about the social world. This is what amelioration aims to do. It is about elucidating ‘our’ legitimate purposes and what concept of *F*-ness (if any) would serve them best – to explicate our target concepts. For instance, if our linguistic repertoire contains a morally and politically defective notion of *family* (one that fails to acknowledge non-traditional arrangements), amelioration has the aim of revising that notion in a manner that does away with the defects. In this case, it would involve engineering and tweaking the constitutive conditions of what counts as a family in a way that does capture non-traditional arrangements as well. Now, relative to gender straightforward conceptual and descriptive analyses of *woman* are insufficient in being theoretically unhelpful. Both approaches aim to explain, articulate, and refine our ordinary *woman*-concept. But either everyday gender vocabulary falsely encodes anatomical features (as with the manifest concept) or it is not specific enough to do the necessary theoretical work (as with the operative concept): ordinary gender talk is too vague and idiosyncratic to be theoretically and politically helpful. Moreover, ordinary speakers tend to be confused about the conditions that make someone a woman. And so, they do not seem to have any introspective privileged access to the content of gender concepts. These problems show the ordinary *woman*-concept to be defective (at least) semantically, theoretically, and politically. In order to overcome the defects, Haslanger advocates for her ameliorative approach to gender.

Of course this sort of project generates many difficult questions about how we decide which conceptual choices to appropriate and endorse: in other words, how do we evaluate which concepts are the most fitting for our purposes. Unfortunately, there are few easy and straightforward answers here. In one sense, the situation does not look so complicated. Given that amelioration is a goal-oriented activity, we appropriate the conceptual tools that best serve our goals. But there may be various aims we might want the same conceptual apparatus to satisfy: for instance, in choosing which conception of *family* to endorse we may have in mind moral/ political goals (e.g. to recognize the rights of adoptive parents), as well as theoretical ones (e.g. to help forge good social scientific theories that can usefully be employed in policy making). These goals may conflict. Perhaps the traditional conception is the most apt on some theoretical grounds giving us a simple and straightforward way to device laws and policies. This generates disputes about the legitimacy and primacy of our goals, which are also enormously difficult to settle (and something I cannot settle here). As Thomasson (2020, 440) puts it, conceptual ethics works on two levels. First, we ask what function our concepts should serve relative to some goals, where our goals are fixed. Second, we can ask deeper questions about what goals we ought to adopt in order to decide what concepts to employ, all things considered. At both levels, empirical realities and people’s lived experiences conceivably play important roles (among others). For instance, think of same-sex couples in long-term partnerships being denied hospital visitation rights on the grounds that they are supposedly not family. In order to ameliorate our conception of *family*, philosophy of language and linguistic intuitions can only go so far; what also matters are personal stories of how ‘our’ social reality arranged according to some linguistic resources (rather than others) harms and hurts us, or unduly constrains and limits our lives. Those who live (so to speak) traditionally gendered lives that conform to typical normative expectations may not realize how lives of others are unduly constrained by prevalent conceptual schemes and linguistic resources – and they may do so without any ill

will or prejudice. Consciousness raising and activism may be necessary in order to engineer and ameliorate ‘our’ ways of thinking and speaking. Clearly there is no guarantee that social actors will reach a consensus in any meaningful sense. We may have to agree to disagree if faced with ‘bad faith’ interlocutors, who are simply unwilling to entertain the legitimacy of different ways of life. Or we may be forced to endorse a plurality of (say) *family*-conceptions for different goals and aims if no consensus is forthcoming (for such “strategic conceptual engineering”, see Brigandt and Rosario 2020). Ethics is hard, and unfortunately conceptual ethics is no different.

That said, despite its clear normative and pragmatic focus, Diaz-Leon (2020) has recently argued for two possible ways to understand amelioration, where one is more descriptive. First, where a term determinately refers to an entity but we ought to change the referent; second, where a term’s referent is indeterminate but it should become determinate, given normative considerations. Many projects usually taken to be purely descriptive are actually ameliorative or contain important ameliorative elements (i.e. the former sorts of projects). Hence, Diaz-Leon holds that normative considerations are not only pertinent to ameliorative projects as traditionally conceived, but also to descriptive projects. This relates back to the discussion above in couple of ways. First, consider how to deal with existence questions that hinge on pragmatic considerations about which linguistic framework is the most fruitful one. A descriptive analysis may deliver multiple frameworks with which to elucidate what there is and how gender might be real. However, in order to decide among those frameworks, we will have to rely on normative considerations that are to do with significance and relevance given the questions we are aiming to answer and the political purposes that we are hoping to achieve. Second, consider the normative disagreements alluded to above. Settling conceptual questions in an evaluative manner – or deciding which conceptual schemes we should adopt – may be less of a fraught exercise if it turns out that the disagreement isn’t entirely normative. Perhaps interlocutors falsely think that they are involved in a purely normative disagreement, and demonstrating that the disagreement is in fact (at least partly) descriptive may help settle some disputes about how we *ought* to think and talk. And so, even though social ontological accounts may involve normatively driven pragmatic decisions about which linguistic framework to adopt, this does not undercut those accounts being descriptive and more or less aptly able to limn the structure of social reality. In other words, there is a way in which normatively driven linguistic approaches like conceptual ethics and amelioration can meaningfully discover *and* construct the nature of the social world. Descriptive analysis can elucidate candidate conceptual schemes ‘out there’, while normative considerations guide our choice of preferred conceptual scheme among the relevant candidates in the service of advocating for some way of life. This enables us to elucidate how language and ‘our’ linguistic repertoire can reveal something significant about the nature of social entities without implausibly buying into radical linguistic constructivism that renders social entities somehow solely dependent on such repertoire.

4 Conclusion: Why Care?

One might wonder whether all of the above is merely insulated philosophical reflection that has no real effects on sociality and our social relations. I wish to close the chapter by offering some reasons to hold that thinking carefully about our conceptual choices is deeply important for social beings like us. To begin with, our conceptual repertoire enables and determines what we can think and say, which frames and constrains action in various ways in both mundane and sophisticated ways. Conceptual availability influences the nature and form of our social and political institutions; it makes certain institutions (un)thinkable and (un)speakable. Think back to the example of *family*. As I have already discussed above, if we only have the traditionally conceived conception in our repertoire, less traditional conceptions simply won’t be articulable. Expanding ‘our’ conceptual repertoire will have profound extra-linguistic and non-conceptual consequences

of making alternative family-models and conceptions possible – for instance, enabling simple everyday actions like being able to visit one’s same-sex spouse in hospital qua family member. Moreover, conceptual choices and possibilities shape what we can do and who we can be. Traditional conceptions of motherhood and what it is to be a mother have included putting one’s children first and prioritizing family life over career aspirations. Due to such conceptions of motherhood, many women self-report struggling with conflicting work life and family demands, and feeling a great deal of guilt in putting their children into daycare. And many are outright scorned for not living up to role expectations as mothers who sacrifice everything for their children. Consider yet another example: in her discussion of hermeneutical injustice, Miranda Fricker (2007) considers Edmund White’s autobiographical novel, *A Boy’s Own Story*. As the protagonist grows up, he is confronted with diverse bogeymen constructions of what it is to be “a Homosexual”. These constructions have significant power to forge not only the subject’s experiences (experiencing one’s sexual desires as shameful and guilt-inducing, for instance), but also his very social being. And so, the available conceptual choices can obscure our knowledge and understanding of our own experiences in harmful and disadvantageous ways. The lack of available hermeneutical resources can misconstrue a conception of ourselves: it can defectively construct self-conceptions that we would not have chosen had different resources been available to us. Again, we can see how language can both discover and construct sociality without this being particularly mysterious. We can discover existing linguistic frameworks to be defective and harmful when they ill fit our experiences and produce jarring effects in our social existence. But as Rachel Sterken holds, such jarring effects may be beneficial:

Changing language, while necessary, is difficult... it can often lead to miscommunication and confusion... [But] these supposed problems can actually be beneficial. It’s *good* that changing language leads to miscommunication and confusion, because that can cause speakers to reflect on their language, and that will lead them to focus on its flaws and ways to improve them.
(2020, 433)

This can lead to a process that Sterken calls ‘transformative communicative disruption’. When faced with such disruption, we can subsequently (and hopefully) find better and more apt ways to account for social entities, kinds, and structures where this will beneficially impact how we understand and shape ourselves as social agents.

Notes

- 1 Butler is not alone in making these sorts of deconstructive claims and the idea that ‘really’ there are no genders is commonplace in postmodern feminism. For instance, Denise Riley (1988) claims that feminists should fight against attempts to classify women since this is always going to be misguided and dangerous. In fact, this is essential to feminism. And Julia Kristeva claims that the notion of *woman* must be deconstructed and cannot be reconstructed: “In [*woman*] I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies” (1980, 137).
- 2 Of course this power isn’t absolute in any robust sense, and it is possible to resist and subvert sexing in the performative sense. My point is simply to illustrate how language not only describes some prior state of affairs, but can bring those states of affairs into being.

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