

# Social Kinds, Conceptual Analysis, and the Operative Concept: A Reply to Haslanger

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## ABSTRACT

Sally Haslanger (2006) is concerned with the debate between *social constructionists* and *error theorists* about a given category, such as race or gender. For example, social constructionists about *race* claim that the term “race” refers to a social kind, whereas error theorists claim that the term “race” is an empty term, that is, nothing belongs to this category. It seems that this debate depends in part on the meaning of the corresponding expression, and this, according to some theorists, depends in turn on our intuitions as competent speakers. But then, what should we say if competent users of the expressions “race” and “gender” understand the terms so that being a natural or biological property is a necessary condition in order to fall under the term? If that were the case, then it would seem that a social constructionist view would be out of the question. Haslanger (2005, 2006) has argued that a social constructionist view could still be defended in that situation. In order to argue for this, she draws on the classical arguments for *semantic externalism* (Putnam, 1975, Burge, 1979, Kripke, 1980), which show that the intuitions of competent speakers concerning the nature of a given category, and the objective type that actually unifies the instances of that category, may come apart. In this paper I will argue that the arguments for semantic externalism concerning natural kinds do not really offer support for Haslanger’s claim that ordinary intuitions concerning social kinds are not relevant.

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## I. Introduction

Sally Haslanger (2006) is concerned with the debate between so-called *social constructionists* and *error theorists* about a given category, such as race or gender. For example, social constructionists about *race* claim that race is socially constructed, that is, the kind or property that unifies all instances of the category is a social feature (not a natural or physical feature, as *naturalists* about race would hold).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, error theorists about race claim that the term “race” is an empty term, that is, nothing belongs to this category, since the conditions that something should satisfy in order to fall under “race” are not satisfied by anything.<sup>2</sup>

What kind of evidence could we use in order to support one or another of these theories? It seems that this debate is in part *semantic*: what makes the case that a category is an empty one, as opposed to it being socially constructed, has to do with the meaning of the corresponding expression. In particular, in the case of race, some people have argued that our concept of race is such that something will fall under it only if it is a *natural* property that can explain certain features. Arguably, there are no natural properties of human beings that can do the explanatory work that races are supposed to do, and therefore, error theorists have concluded that “race” is an empty term, that is, there are no races (Appiah, 1996).

These considerations suggest that if we want to find out whether a certain category is socially constructed, or whether an error theory about it is correct, we have to engage in *conceptual analysis*, that is, we should try to find out what are the conditions for something to fall under the corresponding concept.<sup>3</sup> If these conditions are not satisfied by anything in the actual world (and in order to find this out, we will have to engage in some empirical research), then we can conclude that the category is empty. If, on the other hand, the conditions

<sup>1</sup> Here, by “social feature” Haslanger aims to refer to properties that are socially constructed in the *constitutive* sense, that is, such that in order to define them, we must make reference to their role in certain social structures. This can be contrasted with properties that are socially constructed merely in the *causal* sense, that is, such that social factors play a causal role in bringing them about. See Haslanger (2003) for further discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Social constructionists about race include Haslanger (2000) and Sundstrom (2002); naturalists (or biological realists) about race include Andreassen (1998, 2000) and Kitcher (1999); and error theorists about race include Appiah (1996), Glasgow (2009) and Zack (2002).

<sup>3</sup> See Jackson (1998) for a general defence of this methodology.

are satisfied, but they turn out to be social features, then we can conclude that the category is socially constructed.

If we apply this framework to the cases of gender and race, the social constructionist could find herself in the following predicament. What if it turns out that most competent users of the expressions “race” and “gender” understand the terms so that being a natural property is a necessary condition in order to fall under the term? If that were the case, then it would seem that a social constructionist view would be out of the question: if races and genders have to be *natural* features (by definition), then there are only two open possibilities: either the conditions for membership are satisfied (by natural properties) and therefore naturalism is the correct view, or the conditions are not met (by natural properties) and therefore we should be error theorists concerning the category at issue. In either case, it seems clear that a social constructionist view with respect to that category would have been refuted. As Haslanger puts the problem:

It is clear that the analysis of race I offer does not capture what people consciously *have in mind* when they use the term ‘race’. The account is surprising, and for many, highly counterintuitive ... This counterintuitiveness will always be a feature of social constructionist analyses because ... social constructionists aim to reveal that the concepts we employ are not exactly what we think they are. But if the adequacy of a philosophical analysis is a matter of the degree to which it captures and organizes our intuitions, and if constructionist analyses are always counterintuitive, then it would seem that philosophers would never have reason to consider social constructionist projects acceptable (2006, pp. 93, 94).

## II. Semantic Externalism and Social Kinds

In response, Haslanger has argued that social constructionist views about gender and race can be defended from this charge. In particular, she argues that even if the intuitions of competent users of “gender” and “race” have it that the referents of these categories are *natural* rather than social features, this does not rule out that what actually unifies the instances of these kinds are *social* rather than natural features. In order to argue for this, she draws on some influential arguments in philosophy of language, namely, the standard arguments for *semantic externalism* (Putnam, 1975, Burge, 1979, Kripke, 1980). According to this view, the objective type that all instances of a certain

kind have in common does not need to be transparent to competent users of the term. For instance, competent speakers might associate the term “water” with the following description: “odorless, colorless stuff that fills rivers and lakes, falls from the sky, and so on” (the *watery stuff*, for short). However, the objective type that unifies all instances of water is being  $H_2O$ , not being watery stuff, even if competent speakers might fail to know that water is  $H_2O$ . That is, semantic competence does not provide knowledge concerning the objective type that unifies all instances of a given kind.

Haslanger (2005, 2006) argues that we can extend these ideas to the case of social kinds, so that the fact that competent speakers typically believe that certain categories are natural ones does not have to be an obstacle for claiming that the categories are in fact social. I agree that the arguments for semantic externalism show that the intuitions of competent speakers concerning the nature of a given category, and the objective type that actually unifies the instances of that category, may come apart. However, as I will argue in this paper, I do not think that this idea shows that speakers’ intuitions are not relevant in the case of social kinds.

As we have seen, Haslanger’s main aim is to argue, *contra* the error theorist, that the intuitions of competent users of a term are not as central as error theorists have it. In order to motivate this claim, Haslanger (2006) considers the example of a certain category that has been taken to be a natural (indeed biological) category, namely, *parent*, but she argues it is in fact socially founded. It might be argued that she is replacing our concept of parent (which speakers typically take to mean *immediate progenitor*, that is, a biological kind) with the concept *primary caregiver*, which is clearly a social category; in other words, it might be argued that her account of *parent* as a social concept is not a good account of *our* concept of parent, although it might be a good account of another concept. However, Haslanger argues that her analysis of our concept of parent as a social category is not ruled out by speakers’ intuitions. She writes:

I will argue, first, that the constructionist is not changing the subject, or changing our language; rather, the constructionist is revealing that our linguistic practices have changed in ways that we may not have noticed. Second, I will argue that although the constructionist suggests that we come to a new understanding of our concepts, this does not require replacing our old concept with a new one, but understanding our original concept better (2006, p. 106).

In what follows, I will review Haslanger's main arguments for these claims. As announced, these arguments draw on the lessons of semantic externalism. I will argue that the arguments for semantic externalism concerning natural kinds do not really offer support for Haslanger's claim that our intuitions are not relevant.

### III. Manifest vs. Operative Concepts

In order to argue that our intuitions concerning a concept such as *parent* do not necessarily have to put constraints on our accounts of that category, Haslanger makes a very useful distinction: she distinguishes the *manifest concept* (that is, the concept we take ourselves to be applying) from the *operative concept* (that is, the concept we in practice apply).<sup>4</sup> In order to illustrate this distinction, she presents the following example:

Consider the term "parent". It is common, at least in the United States, to address primary school memos to "Parents", to hold a "Parent Night" or "Parent Breakfast" at certain points during the school year, to have "Parent-Teacher Conferences" to discuss student progress, and so on. However, in practice the term "parent" in these contexts is meant to include the primary caregivers of the student, whether they be biological parents, step-parents, legal guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, informal substitute parents, etc. (2006, p. 99).

In this case, then, the operative concept seems to be the social concept *primary caregiver*, even if the manifest concept is the biological concept *immediate progenitor*.

Haslanger also distinguishes between two sorts of projects that someone interested in the analysis of a certain concept might be concerned with (2006, pp. 94–6). On the one hand, she might pursue a *conceptual* (or *internalist*) project, in which we use *a priori* or introspective methods in order to find out what conditions something has to satisfy in order to fall under the concept (we might examine our intuitions, test possible cases, and so on). On the other hand, she might pursue a *descriptive* project, in which we use empirical methods in order to find out what property (if any) actually unifies the

<sup>4</sup> She also distinguishes those two concepts from the *target concept*, that is, the concept we should be deploying, all things considered. I will mainly focus on the distinction between the manifest and the operative concept, for the purposes of this paper.

instances of the category: we might start by examining some paradigm cases of the kind in question, and find out what objective type we are tracking by using that concept.<sup>5</sup>

Haslanger claims that the outcome of the conceptual project will be the *manifest* concept, whereas the outcome of the descriptive project typically is the *operative* concept. This point is important because she will argue that if we are interested in an account of the operative concept (the concept we in fact apply), then we have to engage in the descriptive project, which, as she says, does not rely on a priori methods (e.g. testing our intuitions about possible cases, and so on), but rather on empirical methods. Therefore, this suggests that in order to reveal our operative concepts, speakers' intuitions are not that relevant, or, as she puts it: «In a descriptive project, intuitions about the conditions for applying a concept should be considered secondary to what the cases in fact have in common: as we learn more about the paradigms, we learn more about our concepts» (2006, p.108). Hence, she concludes, this shows that speakers' intuitions do not rule out the possibility of a social constructionist account of categories such as gender and race.

Unfortunately, I think this argument does not work, mainly because it is not clear that in order to reveal the *operative concept*, we need to engage in the *descriptive* project rather than the *conceptual* project. In what follows, I will elaborate this objection, by exploring two different ways in which we can draw the distinction between the manifest and the operative concepts, and arguing that neither of these characterizations could help Haslanger to show that the conceptual project is secondary with respect to what the operative concept really amounts to.

My plan is as follows. In section 4, I will focus on the distinction between manifest and operative concepts that is suggested by Kripke and Putnam's classical arguments for semantic externalism regarding natural kind terms such as "water", "gold" and so on; and in section 5, I will focus on a related distinction suggested by Burge's classical argument for social externalism. In each case, I will argue that there are no good reasons to hold that the

<sup>5</sup> Haslanger also distinguishes these two projects from the *ameliorative* project, in which we seek to find out what concept we should ideally be using, that is, the *target* concept (see previous footnote). As I mentioned above, for the purposes of this paper we can put aside considerations having to do with the ameliorative project, and focus on the distinction between the conceptual and the descriptive projects.

conceptual project is not relevant in order to discover the operative concept in the corresponding sense.

#### IV. Conceptual vs. Descriptive Projects: An Externalist Account

How should we understand the distinction between the conceptual and the descriptive projects? A natural interpretation is in terms of familiar insights from semantic externalism, which, according to Haslanger, «should be applied to our thought and language about the social as well as the natural» (2006, p. 106). She provides a brief summary of this familiar externalist picture, as follows: «Externalists maintain that the content of what we think and mean is determined not simply by intrinsic facts about us but at least in part by facts about our environment. Remember: Sally and Twinsally both use the term “water”, but Sally means H<sub>2</sub>O and Twinsally means XYZ» (p. 107). With this rough summary of the externalist picture in mind, we can ask: how should these externalist insights be applied to social terms and concepts? Haslanger says:

Descriptive analyses ... seek to discover the *natural* (as contrasted with *social*) kind within which the selected paradigms fall. But it is possible to pursue a descriptive approach within a social domain as long as one allows that there are social kinds or types. ... Descriptive analyses of social terms such as ‘democracy’ and ‘genocide’ ... are methodologically parallel to more familiar naturalizing projects in epistemology and philosophy of mind (2006, pp. 107–8).

And closer to our concerns here, she adds:

Social constructionists can rely on externalist accounts of meaning to argue that their disclosure of an operative ... concept is not *changing the subject*, but better reveals what we mean. By reflecting broadly on how we use the term “parent”, we find that the cases ... project onto an objective social, not natural, type. So although we tend to assume we are expressing the concept of *immediate progenitor* by the term “parent”, in fact we are expressing the concept of *primary caregiver*. ... This is not to propose a new meaning, but to reveal an existing one (2006, p. 110).

I agree with a general idea expressed in these remarks, namely, that the externalist picture about thought and language can also be fruitfully applied to the study of social concepts and kinds. However, I do not agree with

Haslanger's particular way of applying the familiar externalist insights that she is relying on to the case of social terms such as "parent" or "democracy". In order to motivate this claim, I will first explain what the externalist insights are supposed to amount to in more detail, and second, why they do not have the implications with respect to social terms that Haslanger maintains they have.

In my view, the basic externalist insight that is relevant here is roughly the following: When we reflect on the classical arguments for semantic externalism, what these arguments show is that many expressions, such as natural kind terms, exhibit a *dual* structure: they have an *internal* dimension, that is, the referent-fixing information that we associate with the term, which we can typically find out a priori (although it might take a considerable amount of reflection on our responses to actual and possible cases), and an *external* dimension, that is, the property that in fact satisfies that description in the actual world, which we can typically find out empirically.<sup>6</sup> In the case of "water", the internal dimension is something akin to the description "being watery stuff", and the external dimension is H<sub>2</sub>O. We can understand the conceptual-descriptive distinction in these terms: On the one hand, the *conceptual* project aims to discover the *internal* dimension of our concepts, that is, the information that is associated with a concept just by virtue of possessing a concept or being a competent user of the term. This is the sort of information that we can make explicit by examining our intuitions, testing our responses with respect to possible cases, and so on.<sup>7</sup> The *descriptive* project,

<sup>6</sup> See Jackson (1998) for a defence of an interpretation of the classical arguments for semantic externalism along these lines.

<sup>7</sup> I think this is a very plausible interpretation of the externalist insights, but this is of course a controversial view of meaning/content. Some points of controversy are the following: (i) some people reject that what I call the internal dimension of meaning is indeed part of the *meaning* of the term (or the content of the corresponding concept); and (ii) some people reject that ordinary speakers have a priori or introspective access to that internal element (regardless of whether it is part of the meaning). (For instance, Haslanger (2010) seems to endorse these two objections.) I cannot explore these important questions here in any detail, but I will just make a couple of brief points in response: I think we can set (i) aside for the purposes of this debate, since as I see it nothing hangs on whether we consider this internal dimension part of the meaning or content: what is relevant for the role of intuitions and conceptual analysis in the study of social kinds is whether folk subjects have some significant form of epistemic access to certain central beliefs about the referent of the concept, not so much whether these central beliefs are strictly speaking part of the meaning. Indeed, we can also set aside a controversial aspect of (ii), namely, that folk subjects have *a priori* or introspective access to the relevant (reference-fixing) beliefs. All that is needed, in my view, is that there are certain central beliefs that are *non-negotiable* for competent users of the concept, regardless of whether these beliefs are



on the other hand, attempts to reveal the objective type that our concept aims to track. This is usually done by examining the nature of some paradigm cases of the category and finding out what property (if any) explains the features that we associate with the concept (i.e. the features that we came up with in the conceptual project). This second step typically requires empirical research.

However, when we go back to the “parent” example, we can see that in that case, the distinction between the manifest and operative concept does not match the conceptual-descriptive distinction. In that example, it does *not* seem natural to say that school authorities are using a concept of “parent” with a certain internal dimension, namely, “being an immediate progenitor”, and an external one, namely “being a primary caregiver”, in the same way in which it *does* seem natural to say that about a natural kind term such as “water”: we associate this concept with an internal element or condition, namely, “being watery stuff”, and the objective type that *actually satisfies* that condition turns out to be H<sub>2</sub>O (this is the external element). It seems more natural to say that in the case of “parent”, what is going on is that the relevant subjects are just confused about which concept they are applying: if you asked them to define the term, they would say that “parent” means “immediate progenitor”, but when we look at what groups of individuals they are in fact disposed to apply the term to (at least in the relevant contexts), we can see that they would also include adoptive parents, step-parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and so on. But crucially, in order to discover this we do not need to engage in the *descriptive* project: we do not have to focus on some paradigm cases of parents and carry out empirical investigation in order to find out what objective type they have in common. (If we did this, we would probably end up concluding that the common type is the biological property of being an immediate progenitor, since this is what the paradigm instances of “parent” will most likely have in common.) Rather, what we have to do in order to find out the operative concept that people actually apply here is to engage in a more systematic *conceptualist* project: we have to examine the classificatory practices of the relevant speakers, in order to find out what individuals they would classify as parents in both actual and possible scenarios (and this is clearly the business of the conceptualist project). In the example we are

part of the meaning (of whether they are accessible a priori or by introspection). Here I follow Glasgow (2009), who makes similar remarks, if I understand him correctly.

concerned with here, it seems plausible to say that the relevant speakers, when they are reflective enough, would apply the term “parent” to primary caregivers (otherwise, the case at issue would not correspond to our example, such as Haslanger described it).

If these considerations are on the right track, we can conclude the following claim. The phenomenon that Haslanger is concerned with (manifested in the examples of social terms she discusses, such as “parent” or “marriage”) is different from the phenomenon manifested in the standard examples invoked in the classical arguments for semantic externalism (such as “water” or “tiger”). The former examples do not seem to exhibit the sort of internal vs. external dual structure that the latter do. Rather, those social terms are such that they can be (and in fact are) used more or less inclusively, by different communities of speakers (or even by the same speakers, at different contexts). We can use “parent” to refer only to individuals with some biological property in common (i.e. being immediate progenitors), or more inclusively, to all individuals with some relevant social property in common, namely, being primary caregivers.<sup>8</sup> We can use “marriage” to apply only to heterosexual couples, or more inclusively, to both heterosexual and homosexual couples. I agree with Haslanger that we have very good practical and political reasons for using these terms in the more inclusive way. We could express this point by saying that the best account of the concept of parent is one according to which it means “primary caregiver”, or that the best account of the concept of marriage is one according to which it can be applied to both heterosexual and homosexual couples. But here we are no longer searching for the operative concept; rather, we are searching for the concept that we *should* use, given social and political considerations (i.e. what Haslanger calls the *target concept*, which is revealed by means of an *ameliorative* project). But this is different from the *operative* concept.

## V. Social Externalism to the Rescue?

In this section, I would like to examine briefly another class of familiar externalist insights that Haslanger mentions, namely, considerations having to do with the essential role played by the speaker’s *linguistic community* in

<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, if we use the term in what I call the “more inclusive” way, we will also leave out some individuals that do fall under the term according to the “more narrow” understanding, since there are immediate progenitors who do not become primary caregivers.

determining the meaning of an expression (in addition to other external facts about the speakers' environment such as the chemical composition of watery stuff, and so on). For instance, recalling a familiar example discussed by Tyler Burge (1979), Haslanger says:

Sally thinks she has arthritis in her thigh, and is wrong because "arthritis" in her community is an ailment of the joints; Twinsally thinks she has arthritis in her thigh and is right because "arthritis" in her community is an ailment that is not confined to the joints (2006, p. 107).

Along these lines, it might be argued that it is more useful to compare cases of social terms such as "parent" or "marriage" with the case of "arthritis", rather than comparing them with chemical terms such as "water" and "gold", as discussed above. Burge's discussion of "arthritis" is also part of an argument for semantic externalism concerning natural kind terms: the main idea here is that even if some speakers (of our linguistic community) think that arthritis can apply to a condition of the thighs, they are wrong, because given how the term is used by *experts* in our society (to whom we defer), it can apply only to a condition of the joints (but of course it is not necessary to know this fact in order to be a competent user of the term "arthritis", so this aspect of the meaning of the term is not transparent to competent speakers). Likewise, it can be argued, in the case of "parent" or "marriage", we could draw a distinction between the rough conceptions that ordinary speakers associate with the term (i.e. their *manifest* concept), which can contain false beliefs, and the more sophisticated conception that *experts* in our society actually use to determine the referent (i.e. the *operative* concept). This could explain why even if some people take "parent" to mean "immediate progenitor", it actually means "primary caregiver", because this is the real use that the concept has in our society, or at least the full conception that experts have.

The crucial idea here, then, is that we could characterize the distinction between the manifest and the operative concept as follows: the manifest concept corresponds to the different (and possibly mistaken) *conceptions* that speakers have, whereas the operative concept corresponds to the correct conception that *experts* in that community have (and on which ordinary speakers rely in order to be able to communicate with each other successfully). This seems to be a more promising characterization, but it is not clear how it could be applied in the case of "parent", let alone in the more controversial cases of "race" and "gender". Let's start with "parent": Haslanger is surely

right that ordinary speakers could have lots of mistaken beliefs about what “parent” refers to. In particular, when we think about the example of the school memos that she discusses, it is clear that some of the speakers involved (e.g. those teachers that write “parent” with the implicit purpose of referring to the children’s primary caregivers) would have at least *prima facie* wrong beliefs about the extension of their uses of “parent” in that context, given that when they are asked what “parent” means, they would answer “immediate progenitor”, but at the same time they would continue to address school memos to “parents”, they would accept primary caregivers such as adoptive parents and legal guardians at Parent Nights, and so on. Our crucial question here is the following: Is this case sufficiently analogous to the case of the patient who wrongly believes that she has arthritis in her thigh? I do not think so. A crucial difference between the two cases is that the teacher who explicitly says that “parent” means *immediate progenitor*, but implicitly uses “parent” in some contexts to refer to all primary caregivers, has in principle relatively easy (and arguably, introspective or *quasi-a priori*) access to this fact about her linguistic usage, whereas the patient does not have relatively easy access to the relevant fact about her usage of “arthritis”, namely, the fact that in her linguistic community “arthritis” is used to refer to a condition of the joints only. In my view, there is an important difference in the *epistemic situation* of the teacher who uses “parent” to refer to primary caregivers (but explicitly says that “parent” means “immediate progenitor”), and the patient who uses ‘arthritis’ deferentially (and therefore, refers to a condition of the joints) but explicitly says that she has arthritis in her thigh. I think this important epistemic difference is obscured by Haslanger’s suggestion that we should treat both cases analogously. In my view, in the “arthritis” case it is clear that the patient does not have a priori nor introspective access to the actual extension of “arthritis” (or the relevant property). Therefore, in this case it is appropriate to distinguish between the patient’s *internal*, manifest concept, to which she has a priori, introspective access, and her *external*, operative concept, which is fixed by her linguistic community, and to which she does not have introspective, a priori access.<sup>9</sup> However, the situation is very different in the case of “parent”: here, the teacher has (for some reason) the explicit belief that “parent” means “immediate progenitor”, but she also has access (in principle) to the internal fact about her linguistic usage that determines that

<sup>9</sup> See footnote 7 above, for some important qualifications.

her uses of the term “parent” in certain contexts (e.g. school memos, parent-teacher meetings and so on) actually refer to primary caregivers. Therefore, I do not see any reasons here to conclude, as Haslanger does, that speakers’ intuitions revealed by the conceptual project are secondary to questions regarding the operative concepts that our social terms in fact express.

## VI. Natural Science vs. Social Science

In this final section, I would like to examine a possible response to the line of argument I have been rehearsing here. It could be argued that even if we agree with the interpretation of the familiar externalist insights that I suggested above (according to which natural kind terms present a dual structure, with an internal dimension, corresponding to the *manifest* concept, that is typically accessible a priori, and an external dimension, corresponding to the *operative* concept, typically accessible by means of empirical investigation), this does not rule out a possible application of semantic externalism to social terms such as “parent” or “marriage”. In particular, the proposal here is that instead of using natural science to find out the underlying property that certain paradigm cases have in common, we should use social science to find out what interesting properties certain paradigm cases have in common.

This approach has also been defended by Haslanger. For instance, in her (2005), she considers the example of *tardy*, as used at a particular school, and she distinguishes how the concept is used institutionally (e.g. how it is defined by the school district: «any student arriving in his or her homeroom after the 8:25 AM bell is tardy» Haslanger, 2005, p. 13), from how the concept is used in practice, at least in some classrooms (e.g. some teachers do not turn in the attendance sheet until 9 AM). Following her proposal discussed above, this distinction could also be understood in terms of the manifest/operative distinction, that is, the manifest concept here would correspond to the school’s institutional definition, whereas the operative concept would correspond to the way some teachers use the term in practice. Similarly, it could be argued that whereas we could use a conceptual approach to find out what the manifest concept is, the operative concept that people actually use can be revealed only by studying certain relevant practices empirically. Haslanger says: «Those pursuing a descriptive approach will usually select paradigms from commonly and publicly recognized cases; as suggested before, the task is to determine the more general type or kind to which they belong» (2005, p. 16). However, as I

suggested above, this method could be problematic in the case of social kinds, because if we focus on (commonly recognized) paradigmatic cases of, say, being a parent, then the more general type to which they all belong is probably *immediate progenitor*, rather than *primary caregiver*. Haslanger (2005) recognizes that there seems to be a problem regarding how to select the paradigm cases: «For example, the case in which Isaac arrives at school at 8:40 AM (when school starts at 8:25 AM) would count as a paradigm case of tardiness, regardless of what his teacher marks in the attendance sheet» (p. 16). If so, it is not clear that this paradigm-based method is going to reveal the operative concept that is used in practice, but rather the manifest concept according to the institutional definition (or common sense). But Haslanger adds:

Of course, the aim of a descriptive approach in this case is not to provide a *naturalistic* account of tardiness – one that would seek to discover the *natural* (as contrasted with the *social*) kind within which the paradigms fall. ... But it is possible to pursue a descriptive approach within a social domain as long as one allows that there are social kinds or types. [...] However, the investigation of social kinds will need to draw on empirical social/historical inquiry, not just natural science (2005, pp. 16–7).

This passage seems to suggest a possible solution to the problem for the descriptive approach that I posed above. The main problem was that focusing on paradigm cases did not seem to reveal the operative concept that we were interested in (instead, we should focus on how speakers were disposed to use the concept in actual and possible situations, which is the business of the conceptual approach, or so I argued). But here Haslanger is suggesting that the descriptive approach, when applied to social kinds, should rely on social theory, rather than conceptual analysis (broadly conceived). She writes:

The first task is to collect cases that emerge in different (and perhaps competing) practices; then, as before, one should consider if the cases constitute a genuine type, and if so, what unifies the type. This, of course, cannot be done in a mechanical way and may require sophisticated social theory both to select the paradigms and to analyze their commonality (2005, p. 17).

This is an important point: if we can use sophisticated social theory in order to select the paradigms, then maybe we can solve the main problem above. That is, if we can appeal to theoretical considerations in order to select the

paradigms, then maybe we can focus on a more diverse sample of paradigm cases (e.g. a set of paradigms of *parent* including adoptive parents, step-parents, etc.), so that the common type might turn out to be *primary caregivers*, as desired. However, other problems are lurking here. Haslanger claims: «Sets of paradigms typically fall within more than one type. To handle this, one may further specify the kind of type (type of liquid, type of artwork), or may (in the default) count the common type with the highest degree of objectivity» (2005, p. 18). In my view, there are two possible worries here for the claim that the operative concept associated with the relevant social terms can be revealed by means of empirical social theory, without the need for the conceptual approach. First, I think that the conceptual approach will be needed, in order to specify the kind of type that is relevant here. As Haslanger explains, a given set of paradigms falls within more than one type, and it is up to the theorist to decide which is the relevant kind. An important constraint, I contend, is posed by the conceptual/inferential role played by the corresponding concept, and this is revealed by the conceptual approach. Second, Haslanger suggests that when we do not have any good reasons for preferring a specific type over the others, we should just focus on the common type with “the highest degree of objectivity”. Complicated issues arise here: for instance, according to some conceptions of objectivity, physical or chemical kinds have a higher degree of objectivity than biological or psychological kinds, although the latter are “more objective” than kinds from social sciences such as economics or sociology, and so forth. This is a controversial issue that I do not have time to explore here in any detail, but for our purposes my main contention is the following. Although Haslanger is presenting here a very promising approach to the study of social kinds, it seems likely that her method of selecting some paradigms and discovering what common type unifies them by means of social theory will need to appeal to some facts about speakers’ intuitions (plus other facts about ordinary speakers’ usage), in order to decide, first, which paradigm cases should be selected, and second, which one among several candidates turns out to be the shared, objective type that ordinary speakers in a given context are actually tracking when they use a certain concept. Therefore, and to repeat my main point above, I cannot agree with Haslanger that «in any descriptive project, intuitions about the conditions for applying the concept should be considered secondary to what the cases in fact have in common» (2005, p. 17).

## VII. Conclusion

Recapitulating: As we have seen, Haslanger's aim is to extend the ideas of semantic externalism about natural kind terms to the case of social kinds. In order to do this, she compares some standard examples of natural kind terms, such as "water" or "arthritis", with some examples of terms that are socially founded, such as "parent" or "marriage". What these cases do have in common is that many or most ordinary speakers associate some descriptions with the term which do not correspond with the objective type that those terms actually refer to. However, this is not enough to show that in order to reveal the operative concept (the concept we in fact apply), the conceptualist project is irrelevant, or secondary. Actually, what careful analysis of the cases of natural kind terms above shows is that the conceptualist project is a first and crucial step in the search for the operative concept: in order to find out what the referent of, say, "water" or "arthritis" is, we first need to examine our responses to actual and possible scenarios (e.g. Twin-Earth scenarios where the corresponding terms are used in a different way by the experts, and so on), in order to find out what are the conditions that something has to satisfy in order to fall under the term (this is the outcome of the conceptualist project). And once these conditions have been clearly stated, we can then find out what stuff satisfies them in the actual world (this is the descriptive project). However, in the case of contested concepts such as "parent" or "marriage", there is no need in principle for a descriptive project of a similar nature: what seems to be in question in those cases is what the real *application conditions* of those concepts are, that is, the conditions that the relevant entities have to satisfy in order to fall under the concept. And in order to reveal this, the conceptualist project is still the best method we have.<sup>10</sup>

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