

Hacking and Human Kinds

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In Hacking says that human kinds are different from natural kinds.¹ What kind of a claim is this? What import is it meant to have? Is it a metaphysically innocent claim comparable to stating that biological kinds are different from chemical kinds, which are different from subatomic kinds (assuming, for our purposes, the metaphysical innocence of these claims)? Is it a metaphysically forceful claim—one stating that human kinds differ from natural kinds in some essential respect? Or, is it somewhere in between—one implying that, though there may not be any “deep” metaphysical difference between human and natural kinds (e.g., that humans are somehow radically non-natural), theoretical inquiry into human kinds must nevertheless function in some strikingly different ways and with different results from all other kinds of natural theoretical inquiry? Hacking has not been very clear on this point. Though he tries to avoid making statements explicitly committing him to strong metaphysical positions, his arguments do seem to carry metaphysical implications. On a metaphysical commitment scale of one to five, with one being the innocent claim and five being the forceful claim, Hacking’s writings on human kinds

¹ See especially “Making Up People,” “A Tradition of Natural Kinds,” “The Looping Effects of Human Kinds,” and *Historical Ontology*. These works, as well as the rest of Hacking’s works referred to in this paper, will be cited only by their titles. Few page numbers will be given because I am generally citing the main idea of the relevant texts rather than specific passages.

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strike me as placing him somewhere around a four (I use this scaling technique in imitation of and response to Hacking's suggestion in *The Social Construction of What?*, where he uses a similar one himself in regards to social constructivism).

Hacking's writings on human kinds rely very much on observation and empirical methods. Quite often, he seems not only to be documenting the interesting differences in human kinds he claims to have found, but to be inviting or even urging others to pursue his particular kind of research (his writings are often peppered with new hypotheses and provocative questions).² In one of his most important pieces on this topic, Hacking even calls his work a contribution to the "study of making up people" ("The Looping Effects of Human Kinds"). Tendencies such as these place him squarely in the three range of the metaphysical commitment scale described above. However, if the results of his inquiries are true (as I think they are), there is no denying that they imply things about human beings that do not sit well with certain tendencies in the naturalistic tradition in philosophy. Insofar as this is so, Hacking's position gets nudged into the four range of the scale. In this paper I would like to further develop and defend some of the lines of reasoning that lead Hacking to the positions he takes. Specifically, I will defend the thesis that human kinds differ from other natural kinds in an ontologically significant sense by arguing that the epistemology, semantics, and ethics of human kinds feed back onto and change their ontology in a way unlike other natural kinds. Developing and extending Hacking's use of the existentialist tradition in his account of human kinds, I will argue that existential meaning is one of the primary mediating factors in this kind of feedback. Using existentialist insights into identity and action, I will also more fully develop Hacking's use of the idea of spaces of possibilities³ for action in a way that makes the idea less reliant on Anscombe's work on intentional action and so less open to criticism due to Anscombe exegesis.

² One might even wonder if Hacking is trying to develop what he calls a new "style of reasoning" (*Historical Ontology 2*).

³ This is my gloss on Hacking's ideas, an attempt to bring them under one category.

Making Up People Through Looping Effects

Hacking says that we can and do “make up people” or human kinds (“Making Up People”).⁴ By this he means that we make up new identities and personalities as well as new types and styles of actions, emotions, and experiences to go along with them. To illustrate this point, he considers Sartre’s famous narration of how a French *garçon de café* attempts to fulfill the role of being a *garçon de café*. Hacking points out how “being a French *garçon de café*” could not have been anywhere on the map of possibilities for a person in France just a few hundred years ago. Likewise, even though we know that there were French lords and vassals, being a French (or any other) lord or vassal is not anywhere within the range of possibilities for anyone today. These are the types of human kinds that Hacking thinks get made up (as well as disappear). Examples of human kinds that Hacking thinks have been made up relatively recently (i.e., at various times within the last 175 years) and for which he has done historical and empirical research include people with multiple personality disorders, homosexuals, child abusers, schizophrenics, and autistic children. While he does not say that these kinds of people are not real—schizophrenia and child abuse, for example, can be all too real for those who suffer from them—Hacking does give evidence for each of these kinds being relatively new phenomena as kinds (i.e., classifications and identities toward which people meaningfully relate themselves) and asks how it is that they came about. Note that Hacking’s interest here is in some ways rather limited. He is not talking about all human social phenomena. He is not talking about, for example, artifacts, languages, nations, or even many kinds of people. He does not talk about parents, leaders, or farmers or other nearly universal human kinds that exist, in some form or another, in most cultures and in most times.

How does Hacking think human kinds of the sort mentioned above get made up? He says that they arise through a distinctive kind of “looping effect” that obtains between, to use his words, “culture and cognition,” or, to put it another way, between everyday practices and classificatory practices

⁴ Hacking explicitly prefers this phrase to “socially construct people.”

(see “The Looping Effects of Human Kinds”). Once a human kind gets classified and becomes an object for knowledge, control, healing, punishment and so forth, the kind will tend to react and respond to such treatment. The reaction thus creates new properties of the kind. In this way a looping effect is initiated in which kinds and knowledge create each other. Some commentators such as Cooper have focused almost exclusively on classification by theoretical disciplines in the feedback system,⁵ but I think it is important to note that Hacking often emphasizes governmental classification. For instance, we learn that obsessive, nineteenth-century governmental classification of suicide motives was part of a feedback loop that helped create many of the phenomena surrounding suicide (such as the suicide note) that were already in place when Durkheim performed his famous studies of it (“Making Up People”). However, while it is very important to keep in mind, the full significance of this distinction between kinds of classificatory practices in the production of feedback loops will not be my primary consideration.

Hacking’s examples of the effects of feedback loops are surprising and stark. For example, he cites evidence to the effect that the current concept of child abuse did not come into being until about 1961, as earlier concepts of cruelty to children did not include sexual abuse (see *Rewriting the Soul*). Soon afterwards, when governmental agencies started keeping records, the number of child abuse incidences reported was in the low thousands. In less than twenty years that figure had ballooned to over one million and to over two million less than ten years after that. Hacking reports wildly different estimates of what percentage of children have actually been abused. He talks about how child abuse became just about the worst evil one can perform, how now children learn about it in schools, and so on. Through historical investigation, Hacking shows how what is now a very “relevant kind” to our culture was, until very recently, not a part of it at all. The historical chain certainly makes it seem as though a new classification or representation kick started a significant cultural phenomenon.

⁵ See Cooper’s “Why Hacking is Wrong about Human Kinds” (hereafter referred to only by author’s last name).

Realism and Idealism about Kinds

The contention that classification and representation affect their objects immediately arouses the specter of idealism. Is Hacking's proposal about human kinds another form of Kantian idealism? Does the representation of human kinds constitute them? Boyd has offered a distinction that will be helpful here (Boyd, "Realism, Anti-Foundationalism, and the Enthusiasm for Natural Kinds").⁶ In a paper responding to one in which Hacking talked about the looping effects of human kinds, Boyd distinguishes between social practices (such as legal classification) and theoretical disciplines (such as sociology) *causally* affecting and interacting with their objects of study and *non-causally* doing so. He says that only positions holding that social practices and theoretical disciplines non-causally affect or constitute their objects (through convention, analytic truths, etc.) should be considered idealist or neo-Kantian. Boyd offers Kuhn's position of paradigms constituting new worlds as an example. On the other hand, he thinks that any position contending only that there is some causal interaction between theoretical or classificatory practices and their objects of study is perfectly consistent with a realist position. Hacking's later article on looping effects stresses the fact that Hacking thinks the looping relationships in human kinds between culture and cognition are *causal* (he even stresses that the relevant causes are *efficient* causes) and that the goal in studying them is *general* knowledge ("The Looping Effects of Human Kinds").

Of course, there have to be *some* restrictions on the causal interaction of things and their theoretical study and classification for realism to be a viable position. One cannot hold that theoretical disciplines causally change whatever is essential to their objects of study and still hold that such disciplines only discover (and not also create) truths about their objects. Boyd formulates this restriction through his "accommodation thesis" (see, for example, "Homeostasis, Species, and Higher Taxa"). In order to be successful, he says, our explanatory and inductive practices must accommodate themselves to the causal structures of the world. The use of our terms that refer to things in the world must be, at least in part, causally

⁶ This paper and others by Boyd will be cited only by their titles.

regulated by those things themselves and their causal structures. When we accommodate our explanatory and inductive practices to these causal structures (whatever they may turn out to be), there is no need to worry about those same practices causally affecting them to any significant degree. The question, of course, becomes whether such accommodation is possible in the study of Hacking's human kinds.

Another way of putting the realist problem is to say that, for the natural sciences, the epistemology, semantics, and ethics of natural kinds do not fundamentally affect or condition their ontology. However, as I said above, it is precisely my position that Hacking claims that the epistemology, semantics, and ethics of human kinds *do* affect their ontology. How, then, can he be a realist? Two papers critical of Hacking, Boyd's "Realism, Anti-Foundationalism, and Enthusiasm for Natural Kinds" and Cooper's "Why Hacking is Wrong about Human Kinds," raise the question of realism for Hacking. Boyd does not think that Hacking's considerations should keep us from extending "enthusiastic realism" from natural to human kinds. And Cooper thinks that Hacking's position, if true, would have negative implications for the possibility of knowledge, induction, and the formulation of laws in the social sciences (Cooper). Part of the reason for their concern, I think, has to do with ignoring the limited nature of Hacking's claims that I mentioned above. Boyd speaks of the "possibility of social knowledge" and Cooper speaks of the "social sciences" in general. But, as I have pointed out, Hacking is concerned about only *some* human kinds—not *all* human kinds and certainly not all human social phenomena.⁷ They also seem to ignore the fact that Hacking has actually offered quite a bit of general knowledge about the very examples of human kinds he talks about. He has done historical research documenting the rise of each of the kinds he discusses as well as their general features. What is more, he claims to have some general knowledge about their causal structures—that they are constituted through looping effects between "culture and cognition," that part of the causal mechanism of these looping effects includes modification

⁷ The editors, in commenting on this paper, raised the important issue of whether all human kinds are subject to Hacking's looping effects. Here I am focused on Hacking's existence claim that at least some human kinds are subject to looping effects. The question of if or how one could distinguish between human kinds which are or are not subject to looping effects is an important question but not the topic of the current argument.

of possibilities for being and action, etc. Thus, the worry about radical skepticism and strong idealism about human kinds should be defused.

Nevertheless, I do think Hacking is committed to holding that there are important limitations to our knowledge of human kinds as well as differences in how we arrive at that knowledge. First, there probably are differences between the study of “made up” human kinds and other natural kinds. The influence of Foucault on Hacking’s project (which he explicitly recognizes in *Historical Ontology*) should be noted here. Foucault certainly did not think that his “archaeologies” and “genealogies” of human knowledge and kinds were to be seen as modeled on the natural sciences, though he did think he was uncovering real knowledge nevertheless. Second, there probably are no laws associated with the making up of human kinds. Even when a causal mechanism has been identified (e.g., the looping effects), this does not mean that there are strict laws for it. For example, there are no universal laws like the laws of physics that could be used to predict and explain each and every emergence of a new human kind. As Hacking himself says, a unique story probably needs to be told about each human kind (“Making Up People”). For human kinds, then, narration and interpretation are probably ineliminable aspects of appropriate explanation. Third, and most important for this paper, human kinds may be so affected by classificatory practices and theoretical inquiry modeled on the basis of the natural sciences that any claims about the essences of such kinds based on such inquiry is likely to be more creation than discovery. For example, whereas chemistry may discover that water is necessarily H₂O, no such claims about the fundamental identity or causal structure of human kinds such as schizophrenia may be forthcoming. It is to this possibility that I turn next.

Existence, Essence, and Epistemology

As I have mentioned, Hacking employs some of Sartre’s thoughts to illustrate his point about human kinds. Elsewhere, he explicitly recognizes existentialist influence on this work (see *Historical Ontology* 22–23). This is very important in understanding what Hacking says about action and being. One of the core principles of existentialism is that, for humans,

existence precedes essence. Hacking interprets this principle as meaning “we are constituted by what we do” (*Historical Ontology* 22–23). Of course, for Sartre, “what we do” is completely up to the subject because Sartre thinks the subject is completely free to impose whatever meaning it wants on what it does. Hacking, on the other hand, stresses that our possibilities for action are socially structured and constrained. This view is a more Heideggerian way of looking at the problem.⁸ And there is more in what Heidegger says that I think is relevant to Hacking’s project.

As opposed to Sartre, who thinks that the “existence principle” precludes humans having any essence, Heidegger argues that a human’s (Dasein’s) essence is to be found in his existence. For early Heidegger at least, this means that part of the essence of what humans are lies in their being humans (Heidegger, *Being and Time*).⁹ This means, I propose, that while no description nor any theoretical identity statement (like “water is H₂O”), can ever fully capture or identify the essence of being human, humans still share something of a common essence in virtue of their being human. The only way to know fully the essence of being human, though, is to be one. Call this idea the Non-Representability Thesis (NRT). This thesis, then, implies quite the opposite of saying that representations constitute their objects. Rather, the NRT claims that there is something to being human that is in some sense real that cannot be theoretically represented (though Heidegger argues that what is real in this case is not an entity but a way or mode of being). Obviously, it is important to be clearer about the nature of this claim. For example, the NRT is not meant primarily as a kind of mystical ineffability claim to the effect that human lived experience is kind of like a representable experience, only “souped-up” enough to be just out of reach of normal human representation. Rather, it is meant to claim that the existential meaning of being human is non-transferable: the essence of the meaning of being human and the particular way it motivates me is my responsibility and cannot be given to any one else. Descriptions and representations are tools for transferring and disseminating things like bits of information. What cannot be

⁸ This is not to say that Hacking is influenced by Heidegger. Indeed, Glazebrook says that Hacking told her he had decided never to read Heidegger. On the other hand, as Foucault was very much influenced by Heidegger, there may be some indirect influence (Glazebrook, “Heidegger and Scientific Realism”).

⁹ Hereafter simply “Heidegger.”

transferred, however, is my personal responsibility for my particular stand on what it is to be a human being. To give a more concrete example, I can complain all I want to my friends and relatives about how the stress of finals is getting to me, and they can all empathize with me (the NRT is not a solipsistic doctrine). In the end, however, only I can take the responsibility for the choice of how to deal with the stress by studying hard, taking the finals, not taking them, etc. And only I cannot escape the way my choices and their consequences will help condition my life and the meaning it has for me. The NRT rests on the claim that there is something essential to human being about the non-transferability of responsibility for one's choices and way of being. Note that most existentialist writers (including such figures as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus) have written in a wide variety of styles, using new vocabularies, aphorisms, plays, novels, and pseudonymous authorship in order to try and engage the implications of the NRT and to avoid things like theoretical identity statements for human beings.

I think that one way of looking at what Hacking is doing (or is committed to even if he would not say so), in effect, is extending the NRT from humans in general to particular human kinds. Part of the essence of being homosexual or schizophrenic consists in the ways in which the meaning of being those things conditions a person's life, her motivations, possibilities for achievement, fulfillment, action, and so on. Note that the NRT entails that there is some aspect of human kinds unavailable to theoretical knowledge. Furthermore, because there is some such reality (being human) that is not fully representable but that does in fact causally (or motivationally) interact with or is part of the feedback loop, strict laws about how feedback loops work are probably impossible. Let us call that essential aspect of human being that is not fully representable—I have not said anything implying that it cannot be talked about at all—"existential meaning." In the ensuing discussion I will sometimes use the word "motive" in suggesting how existential meaning operates in people's lives. By "motive" and its cognates I mean those meaningful possibilities for the sake of which an agent can act.¹⁰ In order to defend Hacking's important points in this regard, I would

¹⁰ Though this way of considering motives is not unique to him, I primarily follow Wrathall's "Motives, Reasons, and Causes" here.

like to turn to how existential meaning mediates the conditioning of possibilities of action.

Meaning, Possibility, and Action

Hacking employs Anscombe's work on intentional action to show how concepts and meaning can have causal efficacy in human kind feedback loops ("Making Up People" and "The Looping Effects of Human Kinds"). Because, according to Anscombe, all action is action under a description, new descriptions mean new actions.¹¹ And, because the "existence principle" indicates that we constitute ourselves through what we do, new actions mean new identities. New identities can be classified and so new identities mean new kinds. Hence, from new descriptions spring new kinds. Considering Hacking's account of human kinds as a whole, this claim certainly raises the most potential for worries about idealism. Part of what Hacking needs to avoid the idealist charge is an account of how the relevant descriptions and classifications are not arbitrary (so that not just any classification would be causally efficient), even if they are not fully representative of a pre-existing reality. He must also give an account of how some descriptions and classifications take hold while others do not (call this their "stickiness" factor). Later, I will try to give an outline of how an account of the non-arbitrariness and stickiness factors of human-kind-creating descriptions would go. For now, let me try to deflect some other criticisms of Hacking—the charges that he misinterprets Anscombe.

Hacking's use of Anscombe has been the subject of quite a bit of criticism, and the critics have tended to dismiss his theses about the role of possibilities for action in looping effects because of it (see "Why Hacking is Wrong about Human Kinds"; Sharrock and Leudar, "Indeterminacy in the Past"; and Allen, "The Soul of Knowledge").¹² I think the point about Anscombe exegesis could be put aside altogether if Hacking used the more existentialist account of meaning and motives outlined above for his theory

¹¹ The editors of this paper wondered if this amounts to a denial of the NRT. In reply I'd like to say that meanings and representations having some causal impact in the constitution of human kinds does not preclude the necessity of the NRT for an account of how human kinds can be constituted through looping effects. Both are necessary but singly insufficient for the final account.

¹² Sharrock and Leudar's work will be referred to by title alone.

of how action and human kinds interact. Let me introduce that account, however, by way of brief consideration of one of Hacking's critics.

Cooper interprets Hacking as arguing that descriptions extend the logical space of possibilities for action and of using Anscombe's work to back him up (Cooper). She then criticizes Hacking's interpretation of Anscombe and argues that he has not made the case that the logical possibilities of action for an agent are dependent on descriptions available to her. She admits that a person's possibilities for action may be contingently dependent on certain concepts, descriptions, traditions, etc., but thinks this is not metaphysically significant. On the model of logical and contingent possibility, she may be right. But there is a third kind of possibility, existential possibility, for which those categories are not adequate. On the model of existential possibility, what are thought of as merely "contingent" possibilities from a purely detached, theoretical standpoint, may be absolutely essential to the identity of human kinds. And, contra Cooper, Hacking recognizes this and uses it in his account (though he does not use the phrase I do). He speaks of "relevant" and "live" possibilities for action and personhood and even employs some of Sartre's more dramatic idioms of how certain possibilities for action are "absolute, unthinkable, and undecipherable nothingness" for people in different times and places ("Making Up People"; see also "The Looping Effects of Human Kinds"). However, here again, I think that Hacking's account can be supplemented more adequately by Heideggerian insights than Sartrean ones.

Existential possibilities for action differ from logical possibilities in the sense that some "show up" as making sense to do and others are not even, so to speak, "on the map" (see Dreyfus's *Being-in-the-World*).¹³ Some existential possibilities for action cohere with others into spaces of possibilities that make sense for people of certain types to do. Mere logical possibility does not do this. For example, Samurai honor suicides are not within the space of possibilities to a contemporary American. These possibilities also differ from "contingent" possibilities in the sense that they can be life-defining. For example, according to Kierkegaard, for someone who has truly made a life-defining commitment in marriage to another, it makes no sense to say to them "you could have fallen in love with someone else"

¹³ This and other works by Dreyfus will be cited by title alone.

(see “Christianity without Onto-theology” for a discussion of this point).¹⁴ The main point (even if he is wrong about that particular example) is that our actions, though “contingent” in the classical philosophical sense, still thoroughly condition our identities by opening up or closing down further possibilities. For example, though a person might be very talented at multiple sports, the pursuit of becoming a professional at one most likely closes off the possibility of maximizing one’s talents in another. However, these possibilities are dependent on another kind of existential possibility having to do with identity.¹⁵ In the case of both logical and contingent possibilities, possibilities are defined in terms of non-actual, or not-yet-actual states of affairs (substitute events or processes according to your ontological tastes). But possible existential identities cannot be defined in this way. Existentially defining roles, such as being a mother, being a professor, being American, etc., are not states of affairs that can ever be realized and finished. When someone is a mother, and for as long as she is a mother, being-a-mother is always among the possible ways-to-be that open up certain possibilities of action for her. Being-a-mother is inexhaustible. There is no culmination of events in which “being-a-mother” is once and for all fulfilled. It is constantly (so long as a person chooses it) a possibility toward which a mother may meaningfully comport herself.¹⁶ Even possible ways-to-be that people choose to relinquish still condition people’s future possibilities. For example, being a divorced woman has different meanings and possibilities open to it in our society than just being a single, never married woman. It may be countered in response to this line of reasoning that, of course, “identities” are not possible states of affairs, but that is not something unique to humans—being-a-dog is an identity, for example. The difference, though, rests in existential meaning. Being-a-dog is not a meaningful possibility toward which dogs can comport themselves—a dog does not, for instance, take a stand on its particular way of manifesting “doghood.” With this account of existential possibility in place, we can now

¹⁴ I am using Kierkegaard in my “Heideggerian” approach to Hacking due to Dreyfus’s interpretation of Heidegger as being influenced by Kierkegaard.

¹⁵ The following explication of this idea rests on my interpretation of Heidegger.

¹⁶ As has been pointed out to me, a mother can continue to pursue her identity as a mother after the death of her child. This is because so much of her life and her life’s activities have been structured around being a mother. Studying the Samurai lifestyle in the absence of the live traditions, practices, and concerns of the Samurai, however, could never make one a Samurai. At best, it could make one a Samurai-obsessed person of modernity.

turn to the semantics of identity and action terms and descriptions in order to bolster Hacking's own account. In looking at how non-exhaustible existential possibilities and actions that are performed for the sake of them interact with the meaning of the terminology used to describe them, we can better understand the "micro-processes" of Hacking's account of looping effects.

The Semantics of Human Kind Terms

I think that Hacking was on to something when he tried to employ action-creating descriptions in his account of the process through which looping effects make up people. Real, concrete descriptions and classifications are good candidates for the mediation of the effects of abstract things like concepts and meaning in feedback loops. They *can* also do the job of keeping the relevant action *meaningful* and not behavioristic. But Hacking needs to make some important distinctions in order to save fruitful debate about his account from descending into endless exegesis of another author, in this case Anscombe. First, there needs to be a more explicit distinction made between terms and descriptions. Second, there needs to be a distinction made, of the kind just discussed, between types of identities (Hacking's human kinds) and the space of actions possible for them. Finally, we will need to see how these distinctions interact and what they mean for Hacking's account. An account of how the semantics of human and action kind terms and descriptions work will also help us see how existential meaning is involved in the mediation of the looping relations between classification and culture. For purposes of clarity and presentation of the distinctions, I have included the table on the following page. Some examples of each term kind are taken from Hacking's own examples of human kinds for purposes of illustration of subsequent points.

In discussing Anscombe on action, Hacking seems only to indicate and discuss the role of descriptions of actions (#3a and #3b of table). But a full account of the causal mechanisms involved in the mediation of the feedback loops between cognition and culture needs to make all four of the distinctions listed above. In the making up of new kinds of people, the creation of new types of all four is potentially very important. Let me discuss them.

	Actions	Kinds/Identities
Terms	#1 <i>General Terms for Actions</i> Examples: “killing”; “speech”; “manipulation”; “sodomy”; “intercourse”	#2 <i>Kind Terms</i> Examples: “child abuser”; “homosexual”
Descriptions	#3a <i>General Descriptions of Actions</i> #3b <i>Descriptions of Specific Actions by Agents</i>	#4 <i>Descriptions of Kinds</i> (definitions, actions appropriate to them, etc.)

First, both actions and kinds can have general terms (#1 and #2). General terms for actions can take the form of gerunds or more regular noun forms. Examples of the former include “killing” and of the latter “speech.” I want to argue that because Hacking discusses only descriptions he leaves out an important property of general action and human kind or identity terms, a property that is crucial to an account of the looping effects of human kinds. At least some terms picking out general types of actions and human identity kinds have, above and beyond their purely referential function, non-referential meaning. That is, to use Millian terms, they have connotative properties above and beyond their denotative ones.¹⁷ This may be in contrast to Kripke’s influential arguments to the effect that proper names and natural kind terms refer but have no sense (Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*). Whatever the merits of those particular claims are, I think that they cannot be extended to at least some general human and action terms. However, the arguments for this have to do with empirical observations and not just conceptual analysis or consultation of linguistic intuitions.

As Hacking reminds us in his discussions of human kinds, it *matters* to people whether they are classified by certain terms or not. It also matters

¹⁷ However, I am not claiming that, for example, the non-referential meaning is determined by something like Fregean *Sinn*. As we will see, I think that something more like existential meaning is often involved.

to them how their actions are identified. What people are called can matter to their physical well-being (e.g., being called a Jew in Germany in the late 1930s), their emotional well-being, the space of possible actions and other identities available to them, etc. The same goes for their actions. It makes a difference whether a person's actions are labeled "murder" or "self-defense." It makes a difference to a homosexual whether his sexual activity is identified as sodomy or love-making. General terms classifying human actions and identities are not purely referential because they have meanings or connotations for the sake of which people can act in the process of working out their own ways of manifesting what it is to be the kind involved. When I say that terms have meaning for the sake of which people can act, I do not mean to imply only favorable or even largely free action. Often, the meaning of terms play a restrictive role in people's lives, serving as a basis against which people *react*—and try, among other things, to escape, fight against, or overcome.

Another reason to think that general terms have sense is that the same term, with the same referential function, can have different connotations to different people, at different times, and in different contexts. The term "homosexual" may have very different connotations when used among a fundamentalist Christian sect from when it is used at a gay bar, for example. However, I do not think that the meaning of kind terms is exhausted or fully determined by a set or cluster of descriptions. There are at least two reasons for this. Connotation can be invoked and manipulated by tone of voice, gesture, social setting and so on—that is, by *action*. Second, their non-referential meaning is often up for contestation in society. Because of this, I will hypothesize that a human kind term's *possible* meanings are part of its connotation, where "possible" is meant in a weak sense, covering only those meanings within range of the current debate over the *proper* meaning. That a term has become politicized and a locus of struggle over identity, control, etc., and so has implications for the future, is part of its connotative meaning. This is another reason why descriptions cannot fully capture the meaning of a term—the cluster of possible descriptions is being contested. This is analogous, I think, to the way identities and actions are related to each other. Identities, as shown above, are constantly available for motivating new actions. No set of actions can exhaust

or complete a kind of identity. Conversely, identities are constantly being affected by actions, descriptions, and terms. The four are in a mutually conditioning relationship. What kinds of actions are essential to an identity? What must a person think or do (if anything) to be a homosexual? What defines a child abuser? How can we know when child abuse has occurred? So often, questions like these become ones of political and social control rather than anything like scientific discovery. How someone is classified will always be a matter of existential import and meaning to them. Let me now briefly say some more about descriptions.

Saying that all action is action under a description, as Hacking does, also obscures two ways in which this might be the case (see #3a and #3b in the table). Action descriptions may either (1) further specify or describe conditions under which an action term is applicable (e.g., “using someone’s guilt to make them do something is manipulation”) or (2) report particular instances of actions performed by particular agents (e.g., “Professor Plum committed the murder in the dining room with the candlestick.”) Descriptions of the first kind help determine the range over which general action terms are applied. Descriptions of both kinds often include evaluative modifiers (both adjectives like “intense” or “skillful” and adverbs like “very”). Descriptions of the second kind, as well as their corresponding actions, can also contribute to the general style and meaning of the general type of action through creativity, audaciousness, norm violation, etc. The list of possible properties of action descriptions could go on. The important point to make is that there are probably feedback loops going on all the time at the “micro-level” of descriptions, terms, and actions. Even descriptions of type #3a and #3b and their corresponding actions can influence each other. To say this is to characterize the loop like this: specific actions will have effects on how they are described. How specific actions are described will have an effect on how general types of actions are described and categorized. The categories and descriptions of general action types will impact the meanings of terms for both actions and human kinds. Finally, the meanings of action and human kind terms will have an impact on the way people respond to being classified according to those human kinds (which are themselves specific actions starting the looping process over again). Let us now consider a concrete example.

With these accounts of both existential possibility and human kind semantics in mind, we can look at an example of how classification and action mutually influence each other. We can see how certain terms and possibilities stick and others do not (this is the account of non-arbitrariness and stickiness of terms and descriptions promised above). In discussing Heidegger's later views on language, Dreyfus gives the example of the phrase "laid back" ("Husserl, Heidegger, and Modern Existentialism"). He says that before that phrase was invented and came into use to describe a style or way of living, people were already engaging in the sorts of practices to which the phrase applied.¹⁸ What the phrase did was "gather" the sorts of practices to which it was meant to apply together into a coherent possibility-for-being that then became more publicly and widely available. By doing so, being "laid back" also became a possibility and style that was up for contestation, elaboration, and modification through new practices, what people said about them, whether the term could be used for certain actions, certain people, etc. In fact, previously established possibilities began to show up for people in the light of being "laid back." That is, many people began to evaluate jobs, decisions, places of living, etc., based on whether they would afford a certain degree of being "laid back." The phrase was not arbitrary because it creatively and skillfully used words that drew upon other meanings and connotations already available in our culture and successfully applied them to a new realm. It "stuck" because it aptly brought into focus the meaning of the style latent in the practices to which it applied. It focused a style to which more and more people could meaningfully relate.

Though this example was not one of theoretical or governmental classification, it can easily serve as a model for them. It shows how practices, terms, identities, kinds, and descriptions can all interact and be responsive to each other. On the other hand, it can also point toward what can go wrong with government and theoretical classification. As Hacking sometimes alludes in his writings on human kinds, government and theoretical classification can often serve as mechanisms for control and oppression of marginalized kinds in human culture and society. In contrast to invention of the term "laid back," which may be said to be the result of being in tune

¹⁸ Dreyfus's remarks are rather brief. The rest of the discussion is my elaboration on his brief remarks. However, they are influenced by other remarks he has made on similar issues.

with and receptive to the style and meaning of the practices involved, government and theoretical classifications often serve politically or ideologically driven motives. Not only, then, might we have reason to doubt the accuracy of governmental and theoretical classifications, there may be ethical reasons to be concerned with their classificatory practices (and the kinds they help create through subsequent looping effects). That is, governmental and classificatory classifications may be “sticky” only in so far as they are coercively so. This leads me to one last point of Hacking’s and an example of my own. They should serve to demonstrate the point about ethics being involved in the feedback loops as well as continue to illustrate the ways in which terms, descriptions, and their dissemination in society influence human kinds.

The Ethics of Human Kinds

In some of his writings in the study of making up people, Hacking has suggested that, for human kinds, there may be a certain “indeterminacy of the past” (e.g., *Rewriting the Soul* and “Kind-making: The Case of Child Abuse”). The idea is that new kinds and human actions that were not available in the past may be used to reinterpret the past. The question is whether such past actions were *really* of the new kind or not. Hacking asks, for example, whether certain cases from history that would probably be considered child abuse today were really so when they occurred. He also asks whether it is appropriate to apply certain psychological disorders like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to historical figures, in some cases excusing them of wrongdoing (see “Indeterminacy in the Past: On the Recent Discussion of Chapter 17 of *Rewriting the Soul*). He has suggested that there is no truth to the matter, that some things in the past are ambiguous and indeterminate due to future developments. This claim has engendered quite a debate recently in the journal *History of the Human Sciences* (see “Indeterminacy in the Past”; “Indeterminacy in the Past: On the Recent Discussion of Chapter 17 of *Rewriting the Soul*”; McMillan’s “Under a Redescription”; and Leudar and Sharrock’s “Essay Review: Multiplying the Multiplicity: Are Disassociative Identity Disorders ‘Real?’”). My aim is not to try to sort out that whole issue here. What I

think Hacking *does* show, though, is that another unique attribute of humans and their kinds is that their pasts are something toward which they can meaningfully comport—those pasts can serve as motives for the sake of existentially meaningful action. This seems to be a significant property of human beings. Only they can reinterpret their past and have it be a motive for action and creating new possible kinds. People's pasts are a significant source of existential meaning for them. In reflecting on this idea, I remembered the following incident.

It is a well-known principle of introductory economics that “sunk costs” are irrelevant for future economic choices. That is, people and businesses should only base their economic decisions on the most profitable alternative and not on past expenses. Having “sunk” a lot of money into an unprofitable venture should not keep someone from cutting their losses and taking up a better option. I was once in an economics course where the professor tried to teach (not just illustrate) the students to use this principle in their personal relationships. History should not matter, he said, to whether you continue a relationship with someone. The only thing that matters is which currently possible relationships are likely to bring the most satisfaction in the future. Whether or not this particular piece of advice is good, it strikes me that this is an example of a theoretical social science extending its descriptions for some kinds of economic actions into further realms of human action and identity. Currently, economics and its ideology seem to enjoy particular sway in our society. I wonder, for example, if the influence of the economic picture of humans could be such that it could seriously undermine unique properties of human kinds. Whatever its scope, surely there is something worthwhile about the unique ability of humans to draw upon the meanings in their past as motivations to act on for the future. Could it be possible that intrusion of economic principles onto the way humans define themselves could seriously alter or even effectively disable some of their unique properties that have here been uncovered using Hacking's approach to their study? It may not seem likely, but here is where the importance of the unpredictability of human kinds comes in. Throughout his writing and research, Hacking has shown how quickly and unpredictably human kinds have been and can be “made up.” He shows how certain invented statistical categories shoot up from near

zero to hundreds of thousands in the matter of a few years. I think it is a legitimate and serious question whether the social sciences can significantly affect some of the most important aspects of what it means to be human. Thus, to the extent that human sciences have the power to alter some of our unique abilities, it becomes partly an ethical question what kinds of humans we want to be and whether and to what extent the human sciences should interfere with the development of whatever kinds we may decide are most worth pursuing. It may just be partly an ethical question whether certain human sciences should be restricted from doing some of their work or extending their theorizing in certain ways. This is a dark and foreboding thought. Many historical attempts at the supposed ethical control of science have resulted in failure or even worse kinds of oppression and abuse. It is not within the scope of this paper to fully address this issue. I have merely raised it to illustrate the role that ethics and politics may have in the making up of human kinds.

Conclusion

In this paper I have defended Hacking's work on human kinds by clarifying and elaborating on some of its key elements. Specifically, I have argued that the role of existential meaning in mediating the feedback between cultural practices and classificatory practices is part of what makes human kinds different from natural kinds. Human kinds differ from natural kinds in that their epistemology, semantics, and ethics feed back onto their own ontology in ways different from natural kinds. I have illustrated ways in which this is done and have begun to sketch out a more detailed theory of how terms, descriptions, actions, and identities all interact in the formation of feedback loops. To do this I have argued that there are ongoing "micro-level" feedback loops that are crucial in the creation of kinds that are identified at the larger, theoretical level. I have only given a rough sketch of what these "micro-loops" might look like and how they might operate. I think that further research on them is warranted. Furthermore, I have argued that, while my conclusions do not entail skepticism about general social knowledge, they do imply certain limits to theoretical approaches to human kinds that are modeled on the methods of the

natural sciences. There is a possibility that pursuing certain lines of research into the study of human kinds would violate the accommodation thesis of Boyd, shifting important causal structures of human kinds sufficiently enough to pass off at least partially creative results of social sciences as pure discovery. This possibility further entails the need for ethics in the study of human beings. Finally, it may be responded to my arguments that for all this, it does not entail that human beings are not natural. That may certainly be the case. The purpose of this paper has not been to argue over how to define or apply the term “natural.” Rather, it has been to show important differences between human and other kinds—differences that matter in philosophical discussion about essence and ontology in relation to these kinds.¹⁹

¹⁹ I would like to thank the editors of *Aporia* for useful feedback that improved the quality of the essay.

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