

Social Metaphysics

Instructor: Professor Asya Passinsky

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Credits: 4 US/8 ECTS

Semester: Winter 2022

Meeting time: Thursdays 5:40 to 7:20 pm and Fridays 1:30 to 3:10 pm

Prerequisites: Some background in metaphysics will be useful, but it is not essential

Course level: Master's and Doctoral

Course description: This course will center around one central topic in the emerging field of social metaphysics—namely, social construction. The course will be in three parts. The first part will examine some of the main rival accounts of social construction in the social ontology and feminist philosophy literature. Themes to be discussed include inevitability, interactive kinds, causal versus constitutive construction, mind-dependence, and naturalism. In the second part of the course, we will consider recent attempts to elucidate social construction using tools and concepts from analytic metaphysics. Topics to be covered include ground-theoretic and essence-theoretic accounts of social construction, as well as the grounding-anchoring model. The third part of the course will explore the difference between descriptive and ameliorative social constructionist projects. Readings will be drawn from contemporary sources and may include works by Ásta, Barnes, Díaz-León, Epstein, Hacking, Haslanger, Mallon, Mikkola, Passinsky, Raven, Schaffer, Searle, and Witt.

Learning outcomes: Upon completing the course, students will gain an understanding of the main rival accounts of social construction in the social ontology and feminist philosophy literature, as well as recent attempts to analyze social construction using tools from analytic metaphysics. Students will also gain an understanding of the difference between ameliorative and descriptive constructionist projects. This knowledge will put students in a good position to pursue original research in the emerging field of social metaphysics.

Course format: The course will be run as a seminar, with a significant amount of class time devoted to discussion. During some sessions, authors of papers may join our class discussion via Zoom. Students will also have an opportunity to present their own work in progress to the class if they wish. Students will be expected to come to class having completed the assigned reading, and they will be expected to actively participate in class discussion.

Schedule of topics and readings (subject to change): Please complete the required readings before class. All readings will be posted on the course website.

Week 1: Introduction. Inevitability and interactive kinds

- *Description:* Social construction and inevitability; Hacking's notion of interactive kinds
- *Required reading:* Ian Hacking, selections from *The Social Construction of What?*; Ian Hacking, "The Looping Effects of Human Kinds"

Week 2: Causal versus constitutive construction

- *Description*: The distinction between causal and constitutive social construction
- *Required reading*: Sally Haslanger, “Social Construction: The ‘Debunking’ Project”; Esa Díaz-León, “What Is Social Construction?”

Week 3: Social construction and mind-dependence

- *Description*: The collective acceptance account and the conferralist account
- *Required reading*: John Searle, selections from *The Construction of Social Reality*; Ásta, selections from *Categories We Live By: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories*

Week 4: Social construction and naturalism

- *Description*: A naturalist account of social construction
- *Required reading*: Ron Mallon, selections from *The Construction of Human Kinds*

Week 5: Social construction and essence

- *Description*: Skepticism about essence in feminist theory and race theory
- *Required reading*: Witt, “Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory”; Mallon, “Human Categories Beyond Non-Essentialism”

Week 6: Social construction and essence, continued

- *Description*: An essentialist account of social construction, a new puzzle about social essences
- *Required reading*: Asya Passinsky, “Social Kind Essentialism” (ms.); Mike Raven, “A Puzzle for Social Essences”

Week 7: Social construction as grounding

- *Description*: A ground-theoretic account of social construction
- *Required reading*: Jonathan Schaffer, “Social Construction as Grounding; Or: Fundamentality for Feminists, a Reply to Barnes and Mikkola”; Emilie Pagano, “What Social Construction Isn’t”

Week 8: Social construction as grounding and anchoring

- *Description*: A grounding-anchoring model of social construction
- *Required reading*: Brian Epstein, selections from *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*; Jonathan Schaffer, “Anchoring as Grounding: On Epstein’s *The Ant Trap*”

Week 9: Descriptive and ameliorative projects

- *Description*: Haslanger’s distinction between descriptive and ameliorative projects
- *Required reading*: Sally Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?”; Sally Haslanger, “What Good Are Our Intuitions?”

Week 10: Interpreting ameliorative projects

- *Description*: Two interpretations of Haslanger's ameliorative project
- *Required reading*: Elizabeth Barnes, "Realism and Social Structure"; Esa Díaz-León, "Descriptive vs. Ameliorative Projects: The Role of Normative Considerations"

Week 11: To be determined

- *Description*: To be determined based on the interests of participants
- *Required reading*: To be determined

Week 12: Student presentations

- *Description*: In-class student presentations of final papers
- *Required reading*: None

Course assessment:

For students taking the course for a Grade:

- First in-class presentation, approximately 10-15 minutes in length: 10%. Over the course of the term, students will give a presentation on one of the course readings, or on their own work in progress (if it pertains to the topic of the course). The presentation should focus on critically evaluating an author's argument and/or advancing one's own argument. Students will sign up for a presentation slot at the beginning of the term.
- Second in-class presentation, approximately 10-15 minutes in length: 10%. During Week 12, students will give a presentation on their final paper. The presentation should summarize the main thesis and argument of the paper.
- Final paper, 4000 words in length: 80%. The final paper will be due on the first day of the Spring term. Students will be required to submit a 1-page paper proposal in Week 9.
- Excellent class participation will boost the final grade in borderline cases.

For students taking the course for an Audit:

- Regular class attendance and participation.