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Talking Real and True?

Requirements on Race and Gender Classification

**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I offer additional support for Robin Dembroff’s claim that we needn’t accept the *Real Gender* assumption, or more broadly, we needn’t accept that metaphysics ought to constrain our social kind classificatory practices with gender *and* race terms. This generalized version I call the *Real Kind* assumption. Second, I argue that we also needn’t accept, what I call, the *True Meaning* assumption. This is the idea that social kind classifications ought to track the meaning of operative social kind terms. I argue, among other things, that both imperatives presuppose an epistemic condition that is often very difficult to meet. And, if ought implies can, then we are often under no requirement to follow either the *Real Kind* or *True Meaning* assumption. This means that we needn’t let epistemic reasons (alone) govern classificatory practices of social kinds, and instead focus more carefully on reasons that affect the lives of marginalized folk.

**Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I offer additional support for Robin Dembroff’s thesis that we needn’t accept that metaphysics ought to constrain our social kind classificatory practices. Dembroff calls this the *Real Gender* assumption. Although I am interested in gender in its own right, I want to generalise the scope of this paper to apply to *racial* kinds – I leave it open as to whether my arguments extend to other social kinds. Thus, I will call the generalised version of the *Real Gender* assumption the *Real Kind* assumption:

**The Real Kind Assumption**: ‘Social kind classifications ought to track the operative social kind membership facts’ (Dembroff forthcoming, p. 6).

Unlike Dembroff, however, I will not defend this thesis by showing that social kind membership facts are oppressive. Instead, I will draw attention to the normative force of the Real Kind assumption, and argue that the demand is too strong given epistemic limitations on our ability to know the membership facts of gender and racial kinds. This brings me to the second purpose of this paper. I will argue that not only is it common to see the Real Kind assumption deployed in ordinary discourse, it is also common to see the *True Meaning* assumption:

**The True Meaning Assumption:** Social kind classification ought to track the meaning of operative social kind terms.

Here, the idea is that semantics ought to constrain our social kind classificatory practices. I will argue that, like the Real Kind assumption, we needn’t accept this normative requirement. Dembroff alludes to the possibility of this kind of constraint in passing (forthcoming, p. 2). However, they suggest that the Real Kind assumption is more common than the True Meaning assumption. This might well be true. But the True Meaning assumption is still regularly advanced. It strikes me that while it is common to hear someone say ‘trans women are not women’, it is almost as common to hear someone say ‘that’s not what ‘woman’ *means*’. Further, the ever-growing literature on the semantics of race and gender terms is some indication that our concern is largely with meaning and its relation to classification.

I will show that the normative force of each of these assumptions is too strong for related reasons. Both require the satisfaction of a stringent epistemic condition. For the Real Kind assumption, the demand that our classificatory practices ought to keep track of membership facts *entails* that there must be a means of discerning what these facts are. Otherwise, the demand cannot be met. A similar concern can be raised for the True Meaning assumption. The only difference is that there must be a way of discerning facts about meaning. However, I will argue that it is difficult, often implausible, to epistemically track either kinds or meanings. Thus, if we accept that ought implies can,[[1]](#footnote-1) then we are under no requirement to meet the demands of either assumption. We can put aside epistemic reasons as a requirement on our classificatory practices with race and gender terms, in most contexts, and instead consider more carefully moral, social, political, and practical reasons – the reasons that have real world effects on the lives of marginalized folk.

**1. Real Talk**

Robin Dembroff (forthcoming) has written an insightful essay on why it is we should reject that metaphysics ought to constrain our classificatory practices. Dembroff begins their essay with examples showing that, although often implicit, it is a common theme in much ordinary discourse that people endorse the view that *gender* classifications should track the membership facts that constitute a corresponding gender kind. For example, one should only label or apply the term ‘woman’ to someone who is *in fact* a woman. Dembroff calls this the *Real Gender* assumption:

**Real Gender Assumption**: ‘Gender classifications should track the operative gender kind membership facts’ (forthcoming, p. 8).

On face value, this appears to be an innocuous demand. Shouldn’t we want our classificatory practices to hook up with the world? Perhaps this is something that we should expect from scientific investigation of natural phenomena. And Dembroff admits this. They suggest that ‘[i]t is not unreasonable to want our concepts, linguistic and legal markers, and material spaces to faithfully track these memberships’ (forthcoming, p. 7). But what Dembroff is at pains to show is that social kinds often have oppressive membership conditions, or alternatively, there may be social contexts that unjustly fail to provide membership conditions that would construct a social kind. Dembroff calls this *ontological oppression.* Specific to gender, Dembroff argues that ‘genders that ought to be recognized may not be, and there may be recognized genders with unjust membership conditions’ (forthcoming, p. 2). Thus, according to Dembroff, when one finds themselves in a context in which a social kind has oppressive membership conditions, or the context unjustly fails to provide conditions at all, then one needn’t meet the demand of the Real Gender assumption. One needn’t accept that metaphysics ought to constrain classificatory practices. To think otherwise would be to reinforce ontological oppression – and it is clear that this something we should avoid.

I want to offer additional support for Dembroff’s conclusion that we should reject the Real Gender assumption in the relevant contexts. However, I want to offer support for a more generalised version of this assumption, one that applies to gender *and* race, which I will simply call the *Real Kind* assumption:

**Real Kind Assumption**: ‘Social kind classifications ought to track the operative social kind memberships facts’ (forthcoming, p. 6).

Dembroff does state this generalised version in their essay. And what’s more, they are careful to claim that we needn’t accept the demand of the Real Kind assumption in any contexts in which ontological oppression is present – whether such oppression affects gender, race, or any other social kind. I will argue that we needn’t go through ontological oppression to reject the Real Kind assumption, at least in many contexts. Instead, we can simply reject the assumption on the grounds that it fails to meet a stringent epistemic requirement, and this undermines its normative force. Why is this important? If epistemic reasons are not sufficient to ground a demand to track membership facts with our classificatory practices, then we can appeal to other considerations that are more pressing for the lives of marginalized folk: moral, social, political, practical, etc.

Let’s now explore the normativity of the Real Kind assumption.

*1.1. Normativity and the Real Kind Assumption*

There are all sorts of ‘oughts’ in the world. Perhaps the most common way of understanding what ‘ought’ means is *moral*. However, this isn’t the only way. There are *practical* oughts, *political* oughts, *religious* oughts, *aesthetic* oughts, etc. Thus, one might ask: What is the ‘ought’ in the Real Kind assumption? Immediately, we can recognise that the ought in question isn’t moral. Of course, there might be contexts in which one is required to faithfully track what is in the world. Think of marginalized spaces and the use of correct gender pronouns. After all, this is a matter of recognition respect (Darwall 1977). However, morality doesn’t appear to be the kind of ‘ought’ that is operating in the Real Kind assumption, at least in dominant contexts. So, what is it?

To answer this question, I must answer another: What are we doing when we classify? I will understand classification, with respect to social kinds, as a *disposition.* In particular, classification is a disposition to apply a term or concept on the basis of an opinion or belief about how to identify members of an extension. It appears, then, that the kind of ‘ought’ in question has to do with ensuring that our classifications arecarving the world at its joints. But why do this? It strikes me that the best way to answer this is to ask what our classificatory practices are *for.* As said, when we classify, we classify with terms and concepts. Thus, we can reduce the question: What are terms and concepts for? Mona Simion (2017), in her discussion on the normative limits of conceptual engineering, argues that:

Concepts, just like belief, are representational devices, their function is an epistemic one: to represent the world. In virtue of this function, concepts will be properly functioning when responsive to epistemic reasons, and malfunctional when responsive to practical reasons. Concepts will be good concepts *qua* concepts when they are epistemically good (Simion 2017, 10).

Simion’s suggestion is that concepts properly function when they accurately represent the world.[[2]](#footnote-2) Moreover, Simion adds in an evaluative claim. Concepts are ‘good’ *as* concepts when they are *epistemically* good – when they are representationally accurate. Given that terms are also representational devices, it is not hard to extend this reasoning – for the sake of brevity, I will simply use the word ‘concept’ for now. Thus, from this, we can start to see the normativity of the Real Kind assumption. If concepts *qua* concepts are only good when they are representationally accurate, then there is a corresponding *epistemic* requirement to ensure the accuracy of concepts. Applied to *social* concepts, there is an epistemic requirement to ensure that social concepts accurately represent social kinds. And to accurately represent social kinds is to accurately represent their membership facts or conditions. Thus, *our classificatory practices with social kind concepts ought to track the membership facts of a corresponding social kind* – the Real Kind assumption. In short, the ‘ought’ in the Real Kind assumption is epistemic.

If the function of our classificatory practices is epistemic, and therefore so is the demand of the Real Kind assumption, one might be concerned that Dembroff’s conclusion that we needn’t accept the Real Kind assumption on the grounds of ontological oppression isn’t successful. After all, Dembroff shows us that there is *moral* reason to reject the Real Kind assumption, but this doesn’t show that there is *epistemic* reason to reject it. And, one might think, like Simion, that appealing to morality is the *wrong kind of reason.*

To see this, first consider the wrong kind of reason to revise belief. If Fil offers Fig a million dollars to believe that the sky is green, even though the sky is in fact blue, Fig has all-things-considered reason to believe that they sky is green. Nevertheless, Fig lacks justification for this belief (if she can even form it at all). In other words, the belief is badly formed. According to Simion, ‘[p]rudential reasons are the wrong kind of reasons for belief, no matter what is all-things-considered required in the context’ (2017, p. 9).

Similarly, one might say that if our classificatory practices are designed to keep track of the world, in much the same way belief is, then while morality presents us with all-things-considered reason to change our classificatory practices in the presence of ontological oppression, such a reason is the wrong kind of reason for classification. Otherwise, we will fail to preserve the function of classification – to faithfully keep track of the world.

Some have responded to Simion’s claim that the function of a concept is epistemic, at least in the sense that she has suggested (Podosky 2018, McKenna 2018). Podosky, in particular, has argued that epistemic loss, or representational inaccuracy, is permissible in cases in which concepts, and thus classificatory practices, will feasibly become representationally accurate over time through causal looping effects (2018, p. 8 – 13). This maintains the epistemic function of the representational devices we use in classificatory practices. What’s more is that Dembroff mentions such looping effects as a site for change in the face ontological oppression:

‘...the [Real Kind] assumption is a mechanism for maintaining the ontological status quo. It fails to account for what Ian Hacking, Ron Mallon and others call the “looping effect” between classificatory practices and social kinds. This looping effect, in brief, is the mutual causal feedback between classification practices and what social kinds exist: by developing classification practices, we create social kinds, which in turn impact classification practices, and so on’ (forthcoming, p. 7).

Thus, what we can see is that Podosky’s response to Simion helps Dembroff avoid the charge that morality is the wrong kind of reason for classification: So long as our deviant classificatory practices can feasibly influence social reality so as to render the concepts used in such practices representationally accurate over time, there is epistemic reason, strengthened by moral reason, to do so in the face of ontological oppression.

Despite this, I will argue that the epistemic normativity of the Real Kind assumption gives us reason to reject it in some contexts that *does not* require the presence of ontological oppression. The idea in a nutshell is this: If the Real Kind assumption requires that our social classifications faithfully track social kind membership facts, and such a requirement is epistemic in nature, then *there must be some means of discerning what these facts are.* Otherwise, the demand to keep our representational devices epistemically good cannot be met. That is, if we cannot track the membership facts of social kinds with our classificatory practices, then we cannot be required to maintain the accuracy of our representational devices – how would we?

Before I get to this, I want to introduce another assumption that I think is just as pervasive as the Real Kind assumption. It is the assumption that semantics ought to constrain our classificatory practices. I call this the *True Meaning* assumption. I will show that, like the Real Kind assumption, the True Meaning assumption is too epistemically demanding.

**2. True Talk**

In a passing footnote, Dembroff claims the following:

‘...I target an assumption that the *metaphysics* of gender (i.e., the real definition of *gender* or *woman*, etc.) should constrain gender classification practices. Such views seem, to me, more common than the assumption that the *semantics* of gender (i.e., the correct meaning of ‘gender’, or of ‘woman’, etc.) should constrain these practices’ (forthcoming, p. 2).

Dembroff clearly states that their interest is primarily in the relationship between classification and the metaphysics of gender kinds. However, there is an additional claim that is, to me, surprising: The metaphysics of gender is more commonly appealed to as a constraint on classificatory practices than the semantics of gender. This might well be true. Yet, the difference in the rate at which each is appealed to mustn’t be much. In fact, it strikes me that appeals to metaphysics sometimes, perhaps even often, reduce to appeals to semantics. Consider what seems to be a rather common exchange:

A: ‘Trans women aren’t women’ (Metaphysical claim)

B: ‘Why?’

A: ‘Because they were assigned male at birth.’

B: ‘Who cares?’

A: ‘Well, that’s not what ‘woman’ *means*.’ (Semantic claim)

What this shows, I hope, is that metaphysical claims, which presuppose the Real Kind assumption, are sometimes grounded in semantic commitments. Of course, ‘means’ is ambiguous, or polysemous, or underdetermined, and thus it might be shorthand for a metaphysical statement about constitution or membership facts. However, I will take the use of the term at face value. When someone asks ‘*What makes someone a woman*?’ it strikes me that they could easily have asked, ‘*What does ‘woman’ mean?’* Thus, if appeals to metaphysics to constrain classificatory practices are common, then appeals to semantics to serve a similar constraint are also common; even if less so. Call this the *True Meaning* assumption:

**The True Meaning Assumption:** Social kind classification ought to track the meaning of operative social kind terms.

The True Meaning assumption implicitly appears in the philosophical literature. It is, and has been, a common strategy in theorizing about the metaphysics of social kinds to appeal to semantic, or metasemantic, facts. Ron Mallon (2013) calls this the *semantic strategy.* Mallon argues that several metaphysicians of race use theories of reference as means of inferring the existence of racial kinds. Schematically, the strategy looks like this:

‘First, there is the metaphysical assumption that the world has such and such metaphysical features. Then, there is the *semantic assumption* that some or another particular theory of reference is correct for racial terms or concepts. Finally, it is concluded that racial terms or concepts appropriately refer (or fail to refer) to some or other metaphysical features of the world’ (2013, p. 537).

In other words, we can get at what the world is like by discerning the correct theory of reference and seeing what social kinds this theory commits us to. Moreover, this strategy is not unique to theorizing about racial kinds. It is a common methodological programme in social kind theorizing generally – one only has to think of the proliferation of work on the semantics of gender to see this. After all, from the first-person perspective, object-level questions, such as ‘What is a woman?’ are equivalent to meta-level questions, such as ‘What does ‘woman’ refer to?’ (Schroeter and Schroeter 2015).

Mallon’s insights, it seems to me, reveal an assumption about the relationship between semantics and classification. With respect to metaphysical theorizing, what Mallon shows, perhaps unintentionally, is that race theorists, in particular, hold the True Meaning assumption for the following reason: Social kind classification ought to track the meaning of operative social kind terms *because this will enable us to discern what social kinds there are.* This constitutes an epistemic constraint on metaphysical inquiry.I will come back to this point in §3.

One might stop me at this point and ask, ‘What does ‘meaning’ mean?’ This is a notoriously difficult question to answer. First, word meanings, as I will understand them, are a kind of concept (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, p. 3; Richard 2020, p. 361). The meaning of a term is the concept it expresses in a context.[[3]](#footnote-3) This answers one way of understanding the foregoing question. However, we might talk about (1) meaning as the determinant of reference; (2) or the contribution to what is said in a context; (3) or the ‘anchor of competence, as that with which one must be in cognitive contact with in order to be a competent speaker’ (Richard 2020, p. 327). In the following, I will take meaning, in the broadest sense, to be something along the lines of (1).[[4]](#footnote-4) The meaning of a lexical item, the concept it expresses in a context, determines what the term refers to.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*2.1. For and Against the True Meaning Assumption*

The first reason why one might accept the True Meaning assumption is for its own sake. It’s hard to spell out what this means, but the basic idea is that there is just something intrinsically important about our classificatory practices being faithful to the meanings of the terms embedded in social kind classification.

I think there is obvious reason to reject this. In recent time, many philosophers, motivated by moral, social, and political aims, have offered revisions of extant concepts and terms for the sake of achieving justice. This is called *conceptual ethics* or *conceptual engineering.[[6]](#footnote-6)* Sally Haslanger’s (2000) ameliorative definition of womanis one prominent example.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The reason for revising the concept of woman is to advance pursuits in the project of social justice. It offers feminists philosophers, and activists more broadly, a concept of woman that makes explicit the oppression of women. However, what makes conceptual engineering a difficult project is working out how to implement such ameliorative strategies out in the wild – this is called *the implementation challenge* (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020, p. 3). The initial stages of using a revised concept, one that deviates from prior stable practices of a linguistic community, will involve classification with the use of a term that is intentionally unfaithful to its *actual* meaning. Nevertheless, it is argued, this is something that we should do. Thus, while there might be some intrinsic reason to preserve the fidelity of our classificatory practices, it is does not outweigh other considerations.

Another reason why one might accept the True Meaning assumption is to avoid linguistic confusion. This is related to the concern above. The idea is that if we fail to classify kinds with terms and concepts that conform to prior stable usage, then we will just be causing linguistic havoc – we will end up talking past one another, or be confused about what is being said, etc. In other words, deploying a term or concept that conflicts with ordinary usage is a *linguistic transgression* (Sterken 2019). Jennifer Saul (2006) raises this challenge for Sally Haslanger’s (2000) ameliorative definition of woman. Saul invites us to consider the following:

Imagine that Amanda takes a feminist philosophy class and is convinced by Haslanger’s views. She decides to use the terms woman and man in the way that Haslanger suggests in order to explain to her friend Beau what she as learned. Amanda utters (1):

(1) All women are subordinated by men.

Beau does not use woman and man in the way that Amanda uses these terms. He uses them, let’s say, as sex terms. A first question is what Amanda has said... [P]lausibly, Amanda has said one thing and Beau has understood her as saying another... [This difficulty points] to the seriousness of the confusion that is possible with a contextualist version of Haslanger’s view (2006, 141).

Contrary to Saul, however, Rachel Sterken (2020) argues that when it comes to conceptual engineering, we needn’t worry about using terms or concepts that deviate from ordinary usage. This is because the use of deviant terms or concepts serves as a *linguistic disruption.* It unsettles common ground and causes an audience to reflect on the utility of their language. The hope is that this will result in a *transformative communicative disruption*. In such cases, the hearer reflects on the use of a deviant term or concept, recognizes it as an alternative, and sees it as an improvement. This is all to say that, again, even though transgressing the True Meaning assumption might cause linguistic confusion, this can be easily outweighed by other considerations.

*2.3. A Further Reason Against*

I will explore one further reason why we might want to reject the True Meaning assumption. This reason is parallel to the reason Dembroff offers to reject the Real Kind assumption.

For Dembroff, we needn’t accept the Real Kind assumption on the grounds that there are contexts in which ontological oppression is present. We aren’t required to track social kind membership facts with our classificatory practices insofar as doing so would reinforce unjust membership facts or unjustly fail to recognize possible social kinds. Here, we can see that Dembroff has two versions of ontological oppression:

1. ‘Operative social kinds can have unjust membership conditions and,
2. The structures and practices within a social context can unjustly fail to recognize or construct certain kind’ (forthcoming, p. 4 – 5).

To see (1), Dembroff invites us to consider marriage*.* Prior to legal revisions in many countries, the social kind *marriage* had heterosexist membership conditions – it only allowed different-sex people to be legally recognized as a married couple.

(2) is a little harder to see. Nevertheless, Dembroff offers an illuminating example:

‘Consider the long struggle against what has come to be known as “bisexual erasure”, or the systematic misrecognition of bisexual identity. This misrecognition is a global phenomenon, and has been well documented across both legal and non-legal contexts. Due to pervasive protection of heteronormativity, and the corresponding policing of masculinity and erasure of female sexuality, bisexual men frequently are classified as gay, and bisexual women as straight, despite their protests to the contrary’ (forthcoming, p. 6).

This case reveals that even though, at one point in history, the operative sexual orientation kinds did not have unjust membership conditions (e.g., gay, straight), the failure to recognize alternative kinds, such as bisexual identity, nevertheless constituted an injustice.

Is there a semantic correlate of ontological oppression? A *semantic* oppression? If there is, it might be described as such:

1. Operative social kind terms can have unjust meanings and,
2. The structures and practices within a social context can unjustly fail to recognize or construct social terms or concepts.

While (3) is perhaps something implicit in much existing literature, (4) is a form of injustice that has been widely spoken about. Thus, I will start with (4).

The idea that structures and practices can unjustly fail to recognize or construct social terms or concepts is called *hermeneutical injustice* (Fricker 2007, chp. 5). Hermeneutical injustice occurs when a marginalized person is unable to render intelligible experience, and therefore unable to convey this experience across social space, owing to a lacuna in a collective set of epistemic resources (such as concepts). This occurs under conditions of *hermeneutical marginalization*: prejudicial constraints that prevent marginalized groups from participating equally in the structural processes that give rise to the shared epistemic resources of a thinking and speaking community.

A paradigm example, offered by Fricker, involves the concept of sexual harassment*.* However, to show the similarity to Dembroff’s ontological oppression, I will use another example. Before there was the concept of bisexual identity, people who were in fact bisexual (i.e., sexually attracted to men and women) were unable to properly make sense of this fact, and were unable to convey their identity across social space – there was no operative interpretive asset that would have enabled them to express to others their sexual preferences in the form of an identity statement (i.e., ‘I am bisexual’).

It has been argued that hermeneutical injustice is either an *epistemic* injustice (Fricker 2007, chp. 5) or a *linguistic* injustice (Maitra 2017, p. 289). It is epistemic insofar as it prevents a marginalized subject from *rendering intelligible* certain experience. And it is linguistic insofar as an ‘agent suffering this wrong is prevented from accurately *describing* their own experience, and as a result, from *communicating* the nature of that experience to others’ (2017, 289 my emphasis). ‘Describing’ and ‘communicating’ are paradigm linguistic capacities.

What we can see is that hermeneutical injustice, or (4), appears to be a correlate of (2). Both involve an unjust lacuna; the only difference is that one lacuna is ontological, and the other is semantic (and epistemic).

Moving onto (3). As I said, if this idea is discussed in the literature, it is only discussed implicitly. There doesn’t appear to be a label that captures the idea that some operative social kind terms have unjust meanings. Nevertheless, I think that there are very clear examples of this. Again, we can point to the literature on conceptual engineering to identify cases. Like Dembroff, many conceptual engineers[[8]](#footnote-8) have discussed the idea that the concept of marriagehas undergone revision for the purposes of making it more justly inclusive. Prior to legal revision, the concept represented something rather explicit: a particular legal union of different-sex couples. However, in the wake of years and years of protest, the meaning of ‘marriage’ was revised to included same-sex couples.

As we can see, there are semantic correlates to ontological oppression. Thus, if ontological oppression gives us sufficient reason to reject the Real Kind assumption, then it seem that semantic oppression, in the form of (3) and (4), gives us sufficient reason to reject the True Meaning assumption.

**3. The Epistemic Condition**

Above I offered reasons why one might accept the True Meaning assumption: (i) it helps us track social kinds; (ii) it is intrinsically valuable; and (iii) it avoids linguistic confusion. However, I argued that neither (ii) or (iii) are compelling. Further to this, I argued that just as we can reject the Real Kind assumption in the presence of ontological oppression, we can reject the True Meaning assumption in the presence of semantic oppression. Yet, in contexts in which semantic oppression is absent, (i) appears to stand as a reason why we should accept the True Meaning assumption.

The central task of the following is to offer an argument against (i). By rejecting (i), as well as (ii) and (iii), I hope to have given a comprehensive argument as to why we should be sceptical of the normative force of the True Kind assumption – while also offering additional reason to reject the Real Kind assumption. I will argue that in order for (i) to be a reason to accept the True Meaning assumption, we must be able to satisfy a stringent *epistemic condition*. A similar epistemic condition, I will argue, applies to the Real Kind assumption. Thus, if such conditions cannot be met, then this undermines both the True Meaning assumption and the Real Kind assumption.

To see the epistemic conditions in question, let’s take another look at the Real Kind assumption and the True Meaning assumption.

**The Real Kind Assumption**: ‘Social kind classifications ought to track the operative social kind membership facts’ (Dembroff forthcoming, p. 6).

**The True Meaning Assumption:** Social kind classification ought to track the meaning of operative social kind terms.

Both assumptions clearly cash out the ‘ought’ as a demand to *track* something. In the former, it is a demand to track operative social kinds; in the latter, it is a demand to track the meanings of operative social kind terms. And, if we accept that ought implies can,[[9]](#footnote-9) then there must be a means by which we *can* trackeither kinds or meanings – we are not required to do anything that isn’t in our power to do. Moreover, the requirement to track kinds or meanings can’t be a demand to track such things *accidentally.* Accidents aren’t up to us. Thus, in order to non-accidentally track operative kinds or meanings, there must be a way of *knowing*, or *justifiably believing*,[[10]](#footnote-10) what these kinds or meanings are. Without this knowledge, there is no corresponding requirement. Thus, we might ask: What would it take to know which are the operative social kinds or meanings in a context?

**4. Meeting the Epistemic Condition**

The foregoing question is perhaps not quite the right one to ask. A better question is this: What would it take to know which are the operative social kinds or meanings in a context in the sense *needed for a demand*? Since we are dealing with an ‘ought’ the standard for knowledge needs to be reasonably high, yet possible to discharge. We should only be expected to keep track of social kinds or meanings with our classificatory practices provided that we are armed with a method of tracking such things that has a reliable strike rate. Otherwise, each demand would be too difficult to meet.

So, what is the relevant sense of ‘know’? It is hard to know what one could appeal to. One might ‘know’ as a matter of intuition, or a feel for the context. Or, one might ‘know’ through assumption or conformity with linguistic behaviour. However, each suggestion is a highly unreliable method of discerning metaphysical and referential facts.

There are more plausible suggestions that can be found in recent literature on the metaphysics of race and gender. In particular, there are two. We might know which are the operative social kinds or meanings of social kind terms by either (a) *knowing a cluster of descriptions associated with a social kind term* or (b) *knowing ordinary linguistic usage with a social kind term*.[[11]](#footnote-11) Let’s first explore both options with respect to the Real Kind assumption.

*4.1. Clusters of Descriptions*

In §2, I discussed a common methodology in racial kind theorizing called the *semantic strategy* (Mallon 2013). To reiterate, the strategy rests on the idea that we are able to get at what the world is like by discerning the correct theory of reference. After all, with the correct theory of reference, we are able to locate social kinds out in the wild. Thus, the semantic strategy is, by its nature, *epistemic.* It enables us to *know* what social kinds there are by seeing what our theory of reference says there are.

Herein lies a way that we can meet the Real Kind assumption: We can track operative social kinds with our classificatory practices by having the correct theory of reference. Specifically, we can track operative social kinds by discerning the reference of the social kind terms used in our classificatory practices. For example, one can meet the demand to track *woman* by having the correct theory of reference for ‘woman’.

On the face of it, the idea that one knows which is the operative social kind in a context when one has the correct theory of reference for a corresponding social kind term seems like a plausible strategy. After all, if we know what it takes for a social kind term to refer, then we are in a position to know the referred-to social kind (if there is one). However, Mallon doubts this line of reasoning. In the literature on racial kinds, the semantic strategy has been deployed over and over again, producing competing ontological stories. Common to these stories is a *descriptivist theory of reference.*[[12]](#footnote-12)On such accounts, what it takes for a racial kind term to refer is the *satisfaction* of a cluster of descriptions. Racial sceptics (Zack 1993, Appiah 1995), racial constructionists (Mills 1998, Taylor 2000), and population naturalists (Kitcher 1999) have all advanced some version of descriptivism (Mallon 2013, p. 546). However, they disagree on which cluster of descriptions must be met in order for a racial kind term to refer – and thus, for there to be a corresponding racial kind. Racial sceptics *deny* that there are races because no description of biological properties can be met; racial constructionists *accept* that there are races because a description of superficial biological properties or institutional conditions can be met; and population naturalists accept that races *might* exist so long as there are the relevant breeding populations (2013, p. 546).

What does this reveal? For Mallon, it is meant to show that metaphysical disputes about race, which rest on differences in preferred theories of reference, are mostly an illusion (2013, p. 547). Further, it shows that metaphysical disputes about race are really just disputes about which theory of reference is correct – specifically, which cluster of descriptions must be satisfied. However, Mallon argues that there is little agreement in the philosophy of language as to which theory of reference is correct. And, it is unclear whether there ever will be agreement. This is because ‘[a]ccounts of reference are justified by reference to semantic intuitions that vary from person to person, and from culture to culture’ (2013, p. 598).

What does this mean for the Real Kind assumption? Without an account of which cluster of descriptions are associated with a social kind term, we are left without a means of knowing which operative social kinds there are. And, without a means of knowing which operative social kinds there are, we are unable to track them with our classifications. Thus, we are not required to follow the Real Kind assumption.

One might be concerned that this is only characteristic of race and race talk. Might there be more uniformity as to what would count as the relevant cluster of descriptions among those who theorize about gender? This seems unlikely. Metaphysicians of gender are as guilty of employing the semantic strategy as metaphysicians of race, and this has produced competing accounts. It probably goes without saying, but there has been a long history of scholarship attempting to discern the relevant cluster of descriptions (biological or social) associated with ‘woman’ that would pick out *woman*.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, this falls prey to same problem raised by Mallon. Accounts of reference vary, and there may never be uniform agreement on what it would take to refer. Thus, we cannot rely on descriptivism to deliver knowledge about gender and racial kinds.

*4.2. Ordinary Usage*

One might think, ‘so much the worse for descriptions’. We should, instead, accept a widely endorsed moderate semantic externalism of the kind advanced by Putnam, Kripke, Burge, and Williamson. On such accounts, the idea is that a range of external factors, factors outside of the head, serve a role in fixing meaning. Thus, if we want to discern which is the operative social kind in a context, we need only look at *stable patterns of usage* with a corresponding social kind term. This provides enough information to discern which is the operative social kind concept in a context.[[14]](#footnote-14) And, armed with this concept we will be able to understand what the term refers to. However, identifying such patterns of usage has its problems.

In response to Haslanger’s (2006) claim that her ameliorative definition of woman may in fact be the ‘operative’ gender concept, even if it runs against intuition, Jennifer Saul (2006) argues that this would be very difficult to discern. Saul contends that ordinary speakers frequently use sex and gender language interchangeably (2006, p. 130). Most speakers use ‘woman’ as both a sex term and a gender term. Thus, there is no uniform usage of gender terms that would enable us to discern the which gender concept (meaning) is being expressed. For example, Saul suggests that none of the following would strike an ordinary speaker as strange:

* ‘Darren is a woman on Friday nights.’ (Here ‘woman’ is used as a gender term.)
* ‘I (like everyone else) never realized Ed was a woman until I saw Ed naked.’ (Here ‘woman’ is used as a sex term.)
* ‘I am a man, but I want to become a woman.’ (It is not so clear here whether ‘woman’ is being used as a sex or a gender term—this depends on whether the transition is taken to involve change of sex or just gender. But this uncertainty doesn’t lead us to any uncertainty about whether the term is correctly used.)
* ‘This is the skeleton of a woman.’ (Here ‘woman’ is used as a sex term.) (2006, p. 130).

Thus, according to Saul:

‘...given these facts of usage, it becomes difficult to conduct a study of our operative gender concept [woman]. Any data that we obtain might concern instead the operative sex concept that is (perhaps wrongly) associated with the word ‘woman’’ (2006, p. 131).

Saul shows that we cannot appeal to ordinary usage of a social kind term to discern the operative social kind concept that it is supposed to express. We use the term ‘woman’ in ways that looks like we are expressing a sex concept, a gender concept, or some confusion of both.

A similar concern is raised by Elizabeth Barnes:

‘Common usage of gender terms in currently in flux... [so] it’s difficult to settle on what, if anything, ‘the folk’ or ‘ordinary speakers’ mean by their gender terms. Teenagers probably mean something quite a bit different from their grandparents; wealthy teenagers in Manhattan probably mean something quite a bit different from working class teenagers in Alabama’ (2019, p. 9).

Instead of confusion between sex and gender talk, Elizabeth Barnes shows there is widespread variation in gender talk alone. This point is also defended by Robin Dembroff (forthcoming b). Some use gender terms to talk about people with particular biological features, and others use gender terms to talk about those with a certain self-identification. Thus, we cannot infer which are the operative gender concepts by examining ordinary usage of gender terms. There is no stable unified usage.[[15]](#footnote-15)

A generalised version of this argument, one that goes beyond the meaning of race and gender terms, is offered by Herman Cappelen (2018). Cappelen contends that, within a semantic externalist framework, meaning is inscrutable. Too much of what determines meaning, such as patterns of usage, is beyond our understanding. Jared Riggs sums up Cappelen’s position nicely,

... we won’t ever know about all the complex linguistic activity the word ‘woman’, say, is enmeshed in. And moreover, even if we did have all *that* information, we still don’t have, and likely never will have, an adequate grasp of the metasemantic facts that determine what a word means *given* certain reference-fixing facts (forthcoming, p. 19).

Thus, the complex and varied usage of social kind terms undermines the Real Kind assumption. Without the ability to discern the operative social kind concept by examining ordinary usage of a social kind term, we stand very little chance of keeping track of an operative social kind. After all, if we cannot work out which is the operative social kind concept expressed by a term, then we cannot know what social kind the term refers to. And, if we cannot know what social kind a term refers to, then we cannot be required to track such kinds with our classificatory practices. Thus, we are not required to follow Real Kind assumption.

It should be easy to see this kind of problem when it comes to race talk. One need only think about the interchangeable uses of race terms with ethnicity terms, nationality terms, cultural terms, religious terms, etc. For example, one might talk about Jewish people, using the term ‘Jew’, to talk about a religion, a culture, a race, an ethnicity. Thus, given these varied facts of usage, it will be difficult to work out which is the operative concept of Jew in a context. As Lionel K. McPherson puts it, ‘‘race’ talk overall is too ambiguous and contested to be salvaged in the search for a dominant understanding’ (2015, p. 676).

Mallon (2013) expresses similar doubt when it comes to race talk. Like differences in description, race theorists also differ in their analyses of the causal-historical uses of race. For example, Andreasen (1998, 2000) endorses a view of race term usage that suggests that, at least in the past, breeding populations, or those populations that are reproductively isolated, are the relevant referent. However, Appiah (1996) vehemently disagrees. He argues that such populations cannot be the referent of causal-historical uses of race terms owing to a mismatch between reproductively isolated groups and those groups we call race. After all, the Amish is an reproductively isolated group, but they are certainly not thought of as a race. Naomi Zack (2002) says something similar about Irish Protestants. Thus, just as there are issues discerning ordinary usage of gender terms, there are issues discerning ordinary usage of race terms. There is often no uniform usage of race terms that would indicate which are the operative race concepts. And, given that we do not have epistemic access to operative race concepts, then we cannot track operative racial kinds with such concepts.

*4.3. Against the True Meaning Assumption*

It only takes a few steps to see how this argument extends to the True Meaning assumption. To reiterate, the True Meaning assumption says that social kind classificatory practices ought to track the meaning of operative social kind terms. However, this requires meeting an epistemic condition: We can only be expected to keep track of the meaning of operative social kind terms provided that we are able to do so. We must have some way of knowing or discerning the meanings of operative social kind terms. If we are demanded to keep track of something, we must be able to reliably meet such a requirement. Otherwise, the True Meaning assumption has little normative force.

I have offered two ways that we might be able to track which are the operative social kinds in a context. One way is with the right cluster of descriptions associated with a social kind term. However, as was said, there is little agreement on what would count as the right cluster of descriptions that would enable us to understand what a social kind term refers to, if it refers at all.

How does this relate to the True Meaning assumption? A theory of reference is unlikely to be sufficient for a theory of meaning. Nevertheless, a theory of reference seems sufficient for knowing, in the sense needed for a demand, the meaning of a social kind term. If the reference of an operative social kind term is determined by the satisfaction of a cluster of descriptions, then we can know the meaning of a term, the concept that it expresses, when we know this cluster.

However, there is little agreement on what would count as the right cluster of descriptions for an operative social kind term to refer. Thus, we aren’t able to know the meaning of an operative social kind term. And, given this, we cannot be required to track the meaning of an operative social kind term. Thus, we are not required to follow the True Meaning assumption.

Another way that we might discern which is the operative social kind is by examining ordinary usage with a social kind term. This would enable us to detect an operative social kind concept. Once we are aware of the operative social kind concept, then we are able know the reference of the social kind term. However, there isn’t enough uniformity in the way we use social kind terms that would enable us to discern which is the operative social kind concept. It isn’t clear which usage counts as contributing to meaning.

Again, we can ask: How does this relate to the True Meaning assumption? To reiterate, word meanings are a kind of concept. And, if examining ordinary usage with a social kind term isn’t sufficient for discerning which is the operative social kind concept, then it isn’t sufficient for discerning the meaning of a social kind term. Given that we don’t know the meaning of an operative social kind term, then we cannot be required to track such meanings.[[16]](#footnote-16) Thus, we needn’t follow the True Meaning assumption.

What I have shown is an argument against (i), which states: We should keep track of the meaning of operative social kind terms because it will helps us keep track of operative social kinds. But, since we cannot keep track of social kind term meanings, we cannot use such meanings to keep track of social kinds. This undermines the True Meaning assumption.

**5. Problems and Solutions**

Some might take issue with what I have said. So I will take time to address two concerns.

One concern is that I haven’t spoken about all possible theories of meaning. The obvious problem with this is that it would take too long go through all accounts. Thus, I restricted my interest to those that are prominent or plausible. However, another problem is that *not all theories of meaning put us in a position to know the meanings of terms.* And, for the True Meaning assumption to have normative force, we must be able to know the meaning of social kind terms.

Laura Schroeter and Francois Schroeter (forthcoming) argue against Cappelen’s view that a moderate semantic externalism entails that reference is beyond our understanding. They argue that despite not being able to know *all* of the relevant inputs that fix reference, such as patterns of usage, this does not mean that we are completely in the dark about the reference of our terms. While this might be right, there is still a lingering question: Does the amount of knowledge that we have about the reference of our terms meet the threshold required to ground an epistemic requirement? I don’t know the answer to this question. Nevertheless, my feeling is that the answer is ‘no’. As we have seen, ordinary usage is too complex, contested, and varied, and it is unclear what else we could have access to that would enable us to reliably track reference.

Another problem that some might have is that there are just some contexts where it is indisputable as to which is the operative social kind concept. This might be because ordinary usage is uniform, distinguishing clearly between sex and gender, race and ethnicity, etc. I believe that such contexts are not statistically common, but nevertheless they impact significant areas of the day-to-day existence of vulnerable groups. I have in mind: philosophy circles, activist spaces, medical institutions, public restrooms, sporting clubs, homeless shelters, survivor meetings, etc. For example, bioethicists might be inclined to question the linguistic status quo when it comes to the use of social kind terms in healthcare. Policy makers might be inclined to consider similar questions when it comes to access to certain public spaces. Thus, in such contexts, are we then required to follow the True Meaning assumption? Well, that depends. As we can see, the True Meaning assumption isn’t undermined as a source of epistemic reason. In such contexts, the True Meaning assumption *can* be followed. However, epistemic reasons aren’t all-things-considered reasons. We should take note of the context, assess whether the operative social kind concept is semantically oppressive, and judge whether alternatives could be plausibly taken up. If it turns out, on the balance of reasons, that we shouldn’t be guided by epistemic reasons, then we are under no requirement to follow the True Meaning assumption.

Moreover, even if the True Meaning assumption can be followed, there are contexts in which this can be easily undermined as a strategy for resistance. After all, the True Meaning assumption says that our classificatory practices should track the meaning of operative social kind terms. This requires that we are able to *know* such meanings. In a context where it is ‘clear’ which meanings are operative, we can obscure this clarity by simply saying that we *don’t know*. This, of course, depends on a kind of epistemic contextualism endorsed by the likes of Lewis, DeRose, and Bloome-Tillman. The idea is that we can ‘troll’ (Tuckwell and Tanter, forthcoming) contexts by simply being recalcitrant.[[17]](#footnote-17) This obscures common ground, rendering it defective, thus rendering no one the appropriate subject of knowledge-ascriptions about which meanings are operative. For example, if someone says ‘I know that ‘woman’ means adult human female because that’s how ‘woman’ is ordinarily used in this context’, then one can respond, ‘No it’s not. ‘Woman’ means, at least in part, self-identifying as such’. In this case, the context was once one in which people could be rightfully attributed knowledge of operative meanings, but after ‘trolling’ the context this attribution is false. A positive upshot is this: If we do not know which are the operative meanings in a context, then we aren’t required to following the True Meaning assumption. Moreover, if we do not have the True Meaning assumption as an epistemic reason to guide our classificatory practices, then we can appeal to other reasons – moral, social, political, practical, etc.

**6. Conclusion**

The foregoing offered additional support for Robin Dembroff’s thesis that we needn’t accept Real Kind assumption. Further, it proposed and argued against a related phenomenon called the True Meaning assumption. I argued that the normative force of each assumption depends on whether an agent can meet a stringent epistemic requirement. For the Real Kind assumption, the requirement is for our classificatory practices to keep track of social kinds; and for the True Meaning assumption, the demand is for our classificatory practices to keep track of the meanings of social kind terms. I argue that neither assumption can provide an account that would enable an agent, in many or most contexts, to meet an epistemic demand. Thus, we are not required to follow either Real Kind assumption or the True Meaning assumption.

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1. The ‘ought implies can’ principle in epistemology typically concerns *belief.* This amounts to something like, ‘if S has an epistemic requirement to believe that *p*, then *S* has the specific ability and opportunity to believe that *p*’ (Cf. Vranas 2007, pp. 169 – 170; Graham 2011; Littlejohn 2012). The relevant requirement in this paper concerns tracking (kinds or meanings), which is constituted by beliefs, or belief-like states. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Simion (2017) says that concepts are like belief in this sense, taking inspiration from Graham (2012). This contrast with a direct reference account of concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Sawyer (Forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Perhaps something close to Kaplan’s (1989) notion of *character*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Of course, one might be more interested in (2) or (3). However, I don’t have time to explore these option in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a comprehensive account of varying projects and commitments in conceptual engineering, see Cappelen, Plunkett, and Burgess (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Part of me feels that the whole field of conceptual engineering is a rejection of the True Meaning assumption, under certain conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, Thomasson (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See, in particular, James Ward Smith (1961). For a general discussion, see Vranas (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. And the standards for knowledge must be possible to meet. If one is unhappy with the word ‘knowledge’, then simply substitute it for ‘justifiable belief’. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It should be noted that neither (a) or (b) constitute a theory of meaning, but are instead ways of *knowing*, to the relevant extent, the meaning of a term. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. There are many prominent accounts of this theory of reference, especially in the philosophy of mind. See: Lewis (1970, 1972), Stich (1982), Churchland (1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Here are some prominent examples: Young (1990, 1994), Frye (1996), Haslanger (2000), and Jenkins (2018). Moreover, we need only think of what Haslanger (2000) has referred to as ‘problem of commonality’ to see that this has been a pressing issue. The problem of commonality questions whether there is anything that women have in common that would count as their ‘gender’ (2000, p. 37). As it stands, the answer seems to be ‘no’. And thus, we have seen the rise of ‘strategic essentialism’, a political tactic whereby members of a group act as if there are unifying features that bind them as a group for the purposes of activism. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Patterns of usage might not be enough to account for the meaning of a term, but knowledge of such patterns of usage seems like it is enough to discern the meaning of a term. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Another way to put this is that there is no rational interpretation of our representational tradition with a gender term that would deliver a determinate meaning (Schroeter and Schroeter 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Within an externalist metasemantics, concept possession is easy (Sawyer forthcoming). However, *knowing* what our concept is, a conception, is difficult. We are often mistaken the concept we possess (e.g., though our concept of whale always referred to whales, we thought it had something to do with fish). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Tuckwell and Tanter (forthcoming) use the notion of ‘trolling’ to argue against single scoreboard semantics. However, I am using the notion of trolling as a means of resisting pernicious contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)