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ARTIFACTS, ARTWORKS, AND SOCIAL OBJECTS

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17.1 Introduction

Artifacts, artworks, and social objects are familiar to us from everyday life. Artifacts include practical items such as tables, chairs, screwdrivers, can openers, and laptops, as well as artworks such as paintings, sculptures, novels, and musical works.[1] Social objects include social and institutional things such as dollars, borders, states, corporations, and universities. Although we are all familiar with such entities, it is far from clear what their nature or essence consists in and whether they even have a real nature or essence. The aim of this chapter is to survey and critically examine various positions on these two central philosophical issues concerning essence and artifacts, artworks, and social objects.

Since there are many different notions of essence in the philosophical literature, it is important to clarify at the outset the notion that I will be invoking in this chapter. This is the contemporary neo-Aristotelian one, well known from the work of philosophers such as Kit Fine (1994, 1995a, 1995b), E.J. Lowe (2008, 2018), and Kathrin Koslicki (2012, 2018). Neo-Aristotelians hold that where x is an object such as Socrates or the Eiffel Tower, a specification of x's essence provides an answer to the distinctively metaphysical question "What is x?". Similarly, where F is a way of being such as knowing or being conscious, a specification of F's essence provides an answer to the distinctively metaphysical question "What is it to F?". Furthermore, neo-Aristotelians hold that this notion of essence cannot be analyzed in terms of the notion of metaphysical modality,[2] and they instead take the notion to be primitive (at least for the purposes of present theorizing). Finally, neo-Aristotelians maintain that the notion of essence is intimately tied to the idea of real definition. A real definition is a definition of a worldly item (e.g., the kind *water*) rather than a definition of a linguistic item (e.g., the word "water"). It is thought that in specifying the essence of a given item, we are thereby providing a real definition of that item.

It is important to also mention several claims that neo-Aristotelians are not committed to. First, neo-Aristotelians are not committed to substantive claims about the sorts of properties that can figure in an item's essence. Thus, they do not maintain that these properties must be intrinsic, microphysical, simple, or discoverable by science. In this regard, neo-Aristotelian essentialism differs markedly from some other brands of essentialism, including essentialism about natural kinds in the philosophy of science literature and essentialism about social

DOI: 10.4324/9781003008750-21

categories in the social theory literature.[3] This is pertinent because it is generally agreed that artifacts, artworks, and social objects do not have essences which are intrinsic, microphysical, simple, or discoverable by science. Second, while some neo-Aristotelians maintain that essentialist truths obtain independently of us and our practices, it is not part of the neo-Aristotelian conception of essence that this be so. The conception itself is compatible with a constructivist view according to which essentialist truths are constructed by human interests, intentions, practices, or the like.[4] This is relevant because some prominent views of artifacts and social objects have it that the natures of these entities are in some sense constructed by us.

There are two distinctions pertaining to essence which bear on our discussion. The first is the distinction between individual and kind essence.[5] Individual essence concerns the essence of individuals or particulars, such as the table in my apartment, Michelangelo's *David*, or the dollar bill in my wallet. Kind essence concerns the essence of kinds, such as *table*, *statue*, or *dollar bill*. The second distinction is between objectual and predicational (or generic) essence.[6] A statement of objectual essence aims to answer a question of the form "What is *x*?", such as "What is this table?". A statement of predicational (or generic) essence aims to answer a question of the form "What is it to *F*?", such as "What is it to be a table?". While these two distinctions are closely related, they are not the same. For arguably, kinds have both an objectual and a predicational essence. For example, it may be thought that part of the objectual essence of the kind *table* is that this kind is essentially an artifactual kind; and it may be thought that part of the predicational essence of the kind *table* is that being a table essentially involves having been made for a certain purpose. While there are many interesting questions concerning the individual essence of particular artifacts and social objects—for example, questions about the essentiality of their origins—my focus in this chapter will be on questions concerning the essence of the kinds *artifact* and *social object* as well as questions concerning the essence of kinds of artifacts and social objects. Moreover, I will specifically focus on the predicational essence of these kinds.

In the next section, §2, I take up the question of whether the kinds *artifact* and *social object*—as well as kinds of artifacts and social objects—have essences. In the subsequent two sections, I assume an affirmative answer to this question and inquire into what these essences may be: §3 addresses the questions "What is it to be an artifact?" and "What is it to be an artifact of kind *K*?", while §4 addresses the questions "What is it to be a social object?" and "What is it to be a social object of kind *K*?". It is worth noting that some of the authors whose views I will be discussing in these two sections do not formulate their own views in terms of a neo-Aristotelian notion of essence—or in essentialist terms at all. However, since the commitments of neo-Aristotelian essentialism are so minimal, I take it that my essentialist re-construal of their views is sufficiently faithful to the original versions. I conclude, in §5, by briefly considering the relation between artifacts and social objects.

17.2 Essentialism

Essentialism about the kind *artifact*, the kind *social object*, and kinds of artifacts and social objects maintains that these kinds have essences. Since my focus in this chapter is on the predicational essence of such kinds, I will be specifically concerned with the view that these kinds have non-trivial predicational essences, i.e., that for any such kind *K*, there is at least one non-trivial essentialist truth of the form "It is essential to *x*'s being a *K* that *p*".[7] Thus, our target essentialist doctrine about artifacts and social objects maintains that (i) there is at least one non-trivial truth of the form "It is essential to *x*'s being an artifact that *p*"; (ii) there is at least one non-trivial truth of the form "It is essential to *x*'s being a social object that *p*"; and

(iii) for any artifactual or social object kind *K*, there is at least one non-trivial truth of the form "It is essential to *x*'s being a *K* that *p*".

The most important challenge to this essentialist doctrine stems from the mind-dependent character of artifacts and social objects. As we shall see, prevailing theories of artifacts and social objects agree that these kinds are mind-dependent, at least in the sense that their existence or the existence of their instances depends upon the existence of minds. While different authors understand the relevant dependence in different ways, it is widely held that the dependence is constitutive as opposed to causal,[8] and necessary as opposed to contingent. If being suitably mind-independent is a criterion for being real,[9] then this strong form of mind-dependence arguably threatens the reality of the kinds in question. And if only real or natural kinds have essences because only such kinds are associated with the sorts of properties that can constitute an essence,[10] then the compromised reality of these kinds in turn compromises essentialism.[11]

Muhammad Ali Khalidi has challenged the first step of this argument against essentialism (Khalidi 2015: 109–10).[12] He argues that mind-independence is not a plausible criterion for realism because there are kinds which are mind-dependent in the relevant sense but are nevertheless real. For example, psychological states such as beliefs, desires, and pains necessarily depend upon the existence of minds in a constitutive way, but they are nevertheless real. However, it may be countered that artifacts and social objects exhibit a stronger form of mind-dependence than psychological states, at least according to some prominent views. Thus, some authors maintain that an object *x* belongs to an artifactual kind *K* at least partly in virtue of the fact that *x*'s maker intended it to be a *K*.[13] And some authors maintain that an object *x* belongs to a social object kind *K* at least partly in virtue of the fact that the relevant community takes it to be a *K*.[14] In contrast, it is not the case that a given psychological state *x* is a belief partly in virtue of being taken to be a belief or partly in virtue of having been intended to be a belief. Whether this stronger form of mind-dependence impugns the reality of artifacts and social objects is an open question. On the one hand, it may be thought that this form of mind-dependence impugns the objectivity of artifacts and social objects,[15] and that being objective is a necessary condition for being real or fully real.[16] On the other hand, it may be argued that psychological states are themselves real, and that an entity's reality cannot be compromised by dependence upon something which is itself real.[17]

The second step of the argument against essentialism may also be challenged on two grounds. First, recall that neo-Aristotelians do not impose any substantive constraints on the sorts of properties that can figure in an item's essence. Thus, the fact that a given kind is not associated with certain special sorts of properties—for example, intrinsic, micro-physical, simple properties which are discoverable by science—does not preclude it from having an essence. Second, there seem to be non-trivial predicational essentialist truths even about unnatural or unreal kinds. For example, consider the kind *witch*. This is an unreal kind if anything is. Yet arguably, it is essential to *x*'s being a witch that *x* has evil magical powers. The existence of this non-trivial predicational essentialist truth about *witch* ensures that this kind has an essence in the relevant sense, given our earlier characterization of essentialism.[18] A similar argument could be advanced for other putatively unnatural or unreal kinds, such as *phlogiston*, *wizard*, *unicorn*, and so on. Of course, these examples do not establish that every unnatural or unreal kind has an essence. However, it would be oddly arbitrary if some unnatural or unreal kinds had essences whereas others did not. So, the examples do lend some support to the general claim that every unnatural or unreal kind has an essence.[19]

17.3 The Essence of Artifacts

If the kind *artifact* and artifactual kinds such as *table* have essences, then what are these essences? Risto Hilpinen nicely summarizes what I take to be the naïve or ordinary view of artifacts, writing that "an artifact may be defined as an object that has been intentionally made or produced for a certain purpose" (Hilpinen 2011: para. 1).[20] Let us call this the "functional-intentionalist view of artifacts". Since even philosophers who ultimately reject this view oftentimes take it as their starting point, it will be useful to consider the view in some detail. Given our neo-Aristotelian conception of essence, the functional-intentionalist view may be construed as providing an account of the full or complete essence of being an artifact:

> FUNCTIONAL-INTENTIONALIST VIEW OF ARTIFACTS: It is essential to *x*'s being an artifact that it is an object which has been intentionally made for a certain purpose.

There are three central components to this view: creationism, intentionalism, and functionalism. Let me elaborate upon each of these in turn.

Creationism says that artifacts are essentially made or created, as opposed to found or discovered in nature. At a minimum, making or creating involves bringing into existence a new object. For example, to make a screwdriver is to bring into existence a new object—viz., a screwdriver—which did not exist before. In typical cases of creation of ordinary material artifacts, the making process involves physically modifying or rearranging some pre-existing material. Thus, the process of making a screwdriver may involve attaching the blade to the handle, and the process of making a sculpture may involve chiseling a block of marble.

More generally, the making process may be taken to involve some sort of "work" on pre-existing material. This work may consist of physical modification or arrangement, non-physical arrangement, indication or selection, appropriation, or the like.[21] One advantage of this more general conception of the making process is that it can accommodate "readymades" and "found objects". Thus, for example, Hilpinen argues that Marcel Duchamp made his famous *Fountain* by selecting and preparing a urinal for presentation in an art gallery (Hilpinen 1993: §6), and Lynne Baker argues that a wine rack can be made out of a conveniently shaped piece of driftwood by being brushed off and then being used as a wine rack (Baker 2007: ch. 3, n. 8).[22] It is important to appreciate that according to such views, readymades and found objects are not literally ready-made or found; rather, these objects are created through minimal means. Another advantage of the more general conception of the making process is that it can accommodate abstract artifacts, such as musical works and fictional characters. Thus, for example, Jerrold Levinson argues that a composer makes a musical work by indicating a sound/performing means structure (Levinson 1980: §4), and Simon Evnine maintains that an author makes a fictional character by indicating a set of properties (Evnine 2016: §4.4).

Intentionalism says that artifacts are essentially tied to the intentions of their makers. In particular, artifacts are essentially the products of intentional activity, as opposed to products of unintentional activity.[23] This distinguishes artifacts from naturally occurring objects which are in some sense "made" by natural processes, such as a cliff formed through weathering and erosion. Moreover, artifacts are essentially the intended products of such intentional activity, as opposed to unintended byproducts of intentional activity.[24] This distinguishes artifacts from unintended byproducts, such as pencil shards that are produced when sharpening a pencil or debris that is produced at a construction site.

Functionalism says that artifacts are essentially tied to intentions with a specific content, namely intentions to produce something which will serve a certain purpose or function. For example, screwdrivers are intentionally produced to turn screws, chairs are intentionally produced to be sat on, and clocks are intentionally produced to tell time. It is natural to suppose that any given artifact essentially has an "intended" or "proper" function in virtue of having been intentionally made to serve this purpose or function.[25] Thus, a screwdriver has the proper function of turning screws, a chair has the proper function of being sat on, and a clock has the proper function of telling time.

A natural corollary of intentionalism and functionalism is that the essence of artifactual kinds lies in their associated proper functions.[26] For example, the essence of screwdrivers lies in the function of turning screws, the essence of chairs lies in the function of being sat on, and the essence of clocks lies in the function of telling time. Let us call this corollary the "functional-intentionalist view of artifactual kinds". The functional-intentionalist view of artifactual kinds may be construed as providing an account of the full or complete essence of being an artifact of kind *K*:

> FUNCTIONAL-INTENTIONALIST VIEW OF ARTIFACTUAL KINDS: It is essential to *x*'s being a member of artifactual kind *K* that it has proper function *F* in virtue of having been intentionally made to serve function *F*.

A well-known virtue of this view is that it correctly classifies malfunctioning artifacts. For example, consider a misshapen screwdriver that cannot turn screws. Intuitively, it is still a screwdriver despite being unable to perform the characteristic function of screwdrivers. The functional-intentionalist view can account for this because the misshapen screwdriver still has the proper function of turning screws in virtue of having been intentionally made for this purpose.

Let me briefly comment on two further aspects of the functional-intentionalist view of artifacts and artifactual kinds. First, the view does not assume that artifacts can only be made by human beings. Thus, for example, if beavers intentionally construct dams for the purpose of creating ponds which protect them from predators, then beaver dams are artifacts according to the functional-intentionalist view.[27] As Beth Preston notes, this aspect of the view fits well with the evidence we have on sophisticated animal cognition (Preston 2018: §1). Second, the functional-intentionalist view restricts artifacts to objects, or what metaphysicians sometimes call "things". Yet it may be thought that there are artifacts which belong to other ontological categories. For example, Evnine argues that there are artifactual events, such as theatrical performances (Evnine 2016: ch. 7). If that's right, then the functional-intentionalist view is unduly restrictive. However, this is not so much an objection to the view as a challenge to show how the view can be extended to entities of other ontological categories.

Having presented the functional-intentionalist view of artifacts and artifactual kinds, let me now turn to consider some of the main challenges and alternatives to this view. I will begin with functionalism. One important challenge to functionalism is raised by Amie Thomasson, who argues that some artifacts are not intended to serve any function at all (Thomasson 2014: §4.2). Her examples include doodles, idly produced paper clip sculptures, and works of art that are intentionally created, but not with any particular purpose in mind. Insofar as these are genuine artifacts, they are counterexamples to the functional-intentionalist view of artifacts. Thomasson's solution to this problem is to replace the requirement that artifacts have an intended function with the more general requirement that artifacts have "intended features", where these features may be functional, structural, perceptible, or receptive and normative (Thomasson 2014: §§4.2–4.3). Thomasson's view avoids the counterexamples

because the artifacts in question are plausibly taken to have some intended features which are not functional. For example, an idly produced paper clip structure may have the intended feature of being composed of paper clips, and a work of art may have the intended feature of being regarded or treated as a work of art.

There are also important objections to the functionalist component of the functional-intentionalist view of artifactual kinds. One objection, pressed by Paul Bloom, is that something can be a member of artifactual kind *K* without having been intentionally made to serve the characteristic function associated with *K* (Bloom 1996: 5–6). Bloom gives the example of a chair that is made only "for show". This chair was not made with the intention that it be sat on, and yet it is still a chair. Another objection, pressed by Thomasson, is that some artifactual kinds—in particular, kinds of artworks—are not associated with any one characteristic function (Thomasson 2014: 48). For example, paintings can be intentionally made to serve myriad purposes, including decoration, documentation, self-expression, and political persuasion. But arguably, there is no single purpose which paintings are characteristically made to serve.

Thomasson proposes an alternative intentionalist account of artifactual kinds which is meant to avoid these objections. Here is Thomasson's formulation of the account:

> Necessarily, for all *x* and all artifactual kinds *K*, *x* is a *K* only if *x* is the product of a largely successful intention that (*Kx*), where one intends (*Kx*) only if one has a substantive concept of the nature of *K*s that largely matches that of some group of prior makers of *K*s (if there are any) and intends to realize that concept by imposing *K*-relevant features on the object. (Thomasson 2003b: 600)

Construed in essentialist terms, the account holds that it is essential to *x*'s being a member of artifactual kind *K* that it is the product of a largely successful intention to make a *K*. In cases where there are prior makers of *K*s, intending to make a *K* requires (i) having a substantive concept of *K* which largely matches that of some prior makers, and (ii) intending to make something which has *K*-relevant features (i.e., criterial features associated with the concept of *K*). In "prototype" cases where there are no prior makers of *K*s, the first condition only requires that the maker have a substantive concept of *K*. In such cases, the maker determines the success conditions for her own act of creation.

Thomasson's view avoids both of the objections raised above. By allowing *K*-relevant features to be non-functional, the view can accommodate artifactual kinds that are not associated with any one characteristic function, such as paintings. And by allowing *K*-relevant features to constitute a cluster rather than a strict set of necessary and sufficient conditions, it can accommodate instances of artifactual kinds that were not intended to serve the characteristic function associated with the kind, such as a chair made "for show".

While Thomasson's view of artifacts and artifactual kinds dispenses with functionalism, it upholds intentionalism insofar as it ties the essence of artifacts and artifactual kinds to the intentions of their makers.[28] Kathrin Koslicki develops an important challenge to such intentionalist views of artifactual kinds (Koslicki 2018: §8.4.1, 2023).[29] The challenge stems from the observation that the intentions of users can diverge from—and arguably override—the intentions of makers. Koslicki illustrates this possibility with the following case.[30] Suppose that Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, intended his device to be an aid for the hearing-impaired. However, later users of the telephone regard it as a long-distance communication device and intend to use it accordingly. Arguably, the intentions of these later telephone users override the intentions of the inventor of the telephone, so that a telephone is essentially a device for long-distance communication rather

than an aid for the hearing-impaired. Yet accounts such as Thomasson's, which hold that the original maker of an artifactual kind *K* stipulatively determines what the *K*-relevant features are, seem committed to saying that a telephone is essentially an aid for the hearing-impaired.

Evnine proposes a plausible response to this challenge, namely that users can also be makers (Evnine 2022: 5–6). Specifically, by intentionally "counter-using" instances of an old artifactual kind *K* in a new way, users can take on the role of makers and create a new artifactual kind *K*'. Thus, in the case of the telephone, the later users intentionally "counter-use" instances of the original artifactual kind, thereby creating a new artifactual kind which we now call "telephone". However, it's unclear whether this line of response can adequately address a version of Koslicki's challenge which pertains to individual artifacts rather than artifactual kinds. Consider the following case. A building is originally constructed to serve as a house. But over time, members of the community come to regard and use the building as a church. Arguably, after enough time has passed, the building comes to be a church. Yet intentionalist accounts such as Thomasson's, which hold that it is essential to *x*'s being an artifact of kind *K* that its maker intended it to be a *K*, seem committed to denying that the building comes to be a church. Applying Evnine's idea of users as makers, we may say that the users of the building create a new individual artifact—viz., a church—through their "counter-use" of the house. However, assuming that the house is not thereby destroyed, we are left with the counterintuitive result that there is both a church and a house standing in the same place at the same time.[31]

The natural alternative to an intentionalist view of artifactual kinds is a use-based view which ties the essence of artifactual kinds to the intentions or practices of users rather than makers.[32] But such a use-based view faces challenges of its own. Perhaps the most serious problem concerns prototype production. Consider, for example, the production of the very first screwdriver. Since at the time of production there are not yet any users of screwdrivers, it is hard to see how a use-based view can account for the apparent fact that this prototype screwdriver is a screwdriver.[33] Another problem, raised by Koslicki, concerns cases in which the users of an artifact are in some sense mistaken in their practice (Koslicki 2023: 226–33). Koslicki gives the example of so-called "amulets". The users of these items regard them as having the function of warding off evil spirits, and they use them accordingly. A use-based view seems to be committed to saying that amulets are essentially for warding off evil spirits and the items in question are amulets because their users ascribe this function to them and use them for this purpose. Yet arguably, the users are mistaken in their classificatory practice and the items in question are more aptly classified as jewelry. A use-based view does not have the resources to secure this alternative classification.

Despite their differences, both use-based views and intentionalist views uphold creationism insofar as they maintain that artifacts are genuinely created. This idea has also been challenged in the literature. One significant challenge comes from the literature on the ontology of music. A prominent view in this field is Platonism, which holds that musical works are abstract sound structures that exist eternally.[34] Platonism entails that musical works are not literally created, since they are not brought into existence at any particular point in time. Given that musical works are artifacts, this constitutes a challenge to the idea that artifacts are essentially created as opposed to discovered. However, there is a forceful objection to Platonism, namely that it denies our deeply held belief that art is genuinely creative. Here is Levinson's eloquent formulation of the objection:

> The whole tradition of art assumes art is creative in the strict sense, that it is a godlike activity in which the artist brings into being what did not exist beforehand—much as a demiurge forms a world out of inchoate matter. The notion that artists truly *add* to the

> world, in company with cake-bakers, house-builders, law-makers, and theory-constructers, is surely a deep-rooted idea that merits preservation if at all possible. The suggestion that some artists, composers in particular, instead merely *discover* or *select* for attention entities they have no hand in creating is so contrary to this basic intuition regarding artists and their works that we have a strong prima facie reason to reject it if we can. (Levinson 1980: 8, emphasis in original)

Platonists have attempted to reply to this objection, for instance by emphasizing the creative nature of discovery.[35] But as Julian Dodd notes, many philosophers still treat this consequence of Platonism as a *reductio* of the view that musical works are abstract sound structures (Dodd 2008: 1119).

Another challenge to creationism comes from the literature on material constitution. Consider a statue that is molded from a pre-existing lump of clay. Monists say that the statue is numerically identical to the lump of clay, whereas pluralists maintain that the statue is numerically distinct from the lump of clay. Monists may argue that when the statue is molded from the clay, there is no new object—viz., a statue—that comes into existence. Rather, an old object acquires a new property, viz., being a statue. Thus, the statue is not literally created from the lump of clay. And likewise for other ordinary material artifacts which are "made" from pre-existing material. But there is a well-known problem with monism, namely the problem from Leibniz's Law. According to Leibniz's Law, *a* and *b* are identical only if they share all properties in common. But the statue and the lump of clay do not appear to share all properties. For instance, the lump of clay could continue to exist if rolled into the shape of a ball, whereas the statue could not exist in such circumstances; and the statue may be well-made while the lump of clay is not well-made. Monists have developed various strategies for dealing with this objection, and pluralists have criticized these strategies.[36] Here it will suffice to note that one's position on the monism-pluralism debate may lead one to reject the idea that artifacts are genuinely created.

17.4 The Essence of Social Objects

Let us now turn to social objects. If the kind *social object* and social object kinds such as *border* have essences, then what are these essences? A prominent and *prima facie* plausible idea, which can be traced back to the work of John Searle (1995, 2010),[37] is that social objects are a special kind of artifact—namely, artifacts which are created and maintained not through mere individual intentionality but through collective intentionality, specifically the collective acceptance of rules or principles.[38] Let us call this the "collective acceptance view of social objects". Construed in essentialist terms, this view provides the following account of the full or complete essence of being a social object:

> COLLECTIVE ACCEPTANCE VIEW OF SOCIAL OBJECTS: It is essential to *x*'s being a social object that it is an object which has been intentionally made and maintained for a certain purpose, through the collective acceptance of rules or principles.

The correlative view of the full or complete essence of being a social object of kind *K* is as follows:

> COLLECTIVE ACCEPTANCE VIEW OF SOCIAL OBJECT KINDS: It is essential to *x*'s being a member of social object kind *K* that it has proper function *F* in virtue of being collectively taken to have function *F*.

There are four central components to the collective acceptance view of social objects and social object kinds: creationism, intentionalism, functionalism, and collective representationalism. Creationism says that social objects are essentially made or created, as opposed to found or discovered in nature. As in the case of artifacts, creationists may wish to allow for "found" social objects such as river borders or tokens of seashell money, which are created with little or no physical manipulation of pre-existing material. Intentionalism says that social objects are essentially tied to the intentional states of members of the relevant community. In particular, they are essentially the intended products of intentional activity. Moreover, their continued existence essentially depends upon the intentional states of members of the relevant community. Functionalism says that social objects are essentially tied to intentional states with a specific content, namely states that involve the ascription of some purpose or function. Moreover, it says that social objects have a proper function in virtue of this ascription of function, and social object kinds are individuated by their associated proper functions. Finally, collective representationalism says that social objects are essentially created and maintained in a distinctively social manner, namely through a community's collective acceptance of certain sorts of rules or principles which involve a concept of the relevant kind of social object. The precise form and content of these rules or principles is a matter of debate in the social ontology literature,[39] as is the nature of collective intentionality.[40]

Having explicated the collective acceptance view of social objects and social object kinds, let us now consider some of the challenges and alternatives to this view. I will focus on what I take to be the three most important and distinctive challenges and on an alternative view of social objects which aims to avoid these challenges.[41] The first challenge, raised by Thomasson, pertains to intentionalism (Thomasson 2003a). Thomasson argues that some social entities are unintended byproducts of intentional activity as opposed to intended products. Her examples include recessions and racism: we evidently do not intend to create recessions through our collective economic activity, nor do we intend to create racism through our collective attitudes, practices, and behaviors.[42] It may be objected that recessions and racism are not social objects because they are not objects or things in the relevant sense. Rather, they are entities which belong to some other ontological category, such as event or activity. However, there are other examples of unintended byproducts which are clearly social objects in the relevant sense. Consider, for example, a boundary between the good and the bad parts of town which emerges gradually over time without anyone explicitly intending to create this boundary; or a corporation that is unintentionally created through the filing of the requisite paperwork.

A second important challenge, raised by Francesco Guala, concerns functionalism as well as collective representationalism (Guala 2016: 167–71). Guala argues that in the case of institutional kinds such as *money*, the essential property which unifies the members of the kind is not some intended or proper function, but some actual or fulfilled function. For example, the essential property which unifies the members of the kind *money* is fulfilling the functions of being a medium of exchange, unit of account, and store of value. In support of this view, Guala points out that this is how money is standardly defined in economics textbooks (Guala 2016: 35). Guala further argues that given this alternative functionalist conception of institutional kinds, collective representationalism should be rejected because collective acceptance of Searlean constitutive rules or the like is not necessary for the fulfillment of a given function. For example, cigarettes may fulfill the characteristic functions of money in a prisoner of war camp without there being collective acceptance of rules or principles of the requisite sort.

Finally, Åsa Burman presses another important objection to an idea which is at the heart of collective representationalism, namely that the creation and maintenance of social reality rests

upon cooperation and consensus (Burman 2023: intro, chs. 1–2). Burman points out that while this may hold true of the simple and imaginary cases that oftentimes serve as paradigm examples in the social ontology literature, it is not true in a vast array of real-world cases which involve significant conflict and contestation. For example, gender and race do not appear to be created and maintained through harmonious collective acceptance of rules or principles which everyone agrees to, but rather through oppressive social practices that privilege some and disadvantage others.[43] And the same may be said for many other social entities which clearly belong to the category of social objects. For example, many political borders have been created through war and subsequent proclamations by the victors. In such cases, genuine collective acceptance is arguably lacking. Instead, those with less power are simply compelled to go along with the will of those who have more power.

Asya Passinsky develops an alternative to the collective acceptance view of social objects and social object kinds which aims to avoid these challenges (Passinsky 2021). The central idea is that social objects are essentially normative entities whose existence is partly a matter of the existence of certain kinds of norms, namely norms of conventional or political morality, legal norms, or prescribed or practiced social norms. Construed as a view of the full or complete essence of being a social object, this normative account says that it is essential to x's being a social object that its existence is partly a matter of the existence of norms of conventional or political morality, legal norms, or prescribed or practiced social norms. The correlative view of the full or complete essence of being a social object of kind K says that it is essential to x's being a member of social object kind K that its existence is partly a matter of the existence of moral, legal, or social norms $N_1, \ldots, N_k$ (or a sufficient number thereof). Thus, the kind *social object* is understood in normative terms rather than functional-intentionalist terms, and kinds of social objects are individuated by their associated norms rather than their associated proper functions.

Passinsky's normative view of social objects and social object kinds avoids Thomasson's challenge because moral, legal, and social norms can be created unintentionally as well as intentionally. For example, social norms can emerge gradually over time as certain behaviors come to be viewed as appropriate within a community, without anyone explicitly intending to create such norms. And legal norms can be created unintentionally through the unwitting exercise of legal powers. In cases where the relevant norms are created unintentionally, the corresponding social objects are created unintentionally. The view also avoids Burman's and Guala's objections to collective representationalism because the existence of moral, legal, and social norms need not be grounded in collective acceptance of rules or principles—or in agreement or consensus more generally. This is evident from the fact that throughout history, there have been many extant laws and social norms which were not collectively accepted by members of the relevant society, including laws against interracial marriage, sodomy laws, and gender norms. In cases where the existence of the relevant norms is not grounded in collective acceptance, the corresponding social objects are not created or maintained through collective acceptance. Finally, by essentially tying social object kinds to norms rather than functions, the view avoids taking a stand on whether the functions typically associated with kinds of social objects are best construed as proper functions or fulfilled functions.

17.5 Conclusion

We have thus far considered various views on the essence of artifacts and social objects, respectively. A question which remains—and which has been underexplored in the existing literature—concerns the precise relation between artifacts and social objects: Are social

objects a kind of artifact? Or conversely, are artifacts a kind of social object? Or is neither a subkind of the other? Of course, one's position on this question will depend on one's preferred view of artifacts and social objects. But let me mention two salient alternatives here. The first combines the functional-intentionalist view of artifacts with the collective acceptance view of social objects. This leads to the view that social objects are a kind of artifact, namely artifacts which are created and maintained through the collective acceptance of rules or principles. The study of social objects then turns out to be a branch of the study of artifacts. The second alternative combines the functional-intentionalist view of artifacts with a normative view of social objects that allows for more kinds of normativity to ground the existence of these objects. This leads to the view that artifacts are a kind of social object, namely social objects whose existence is partly a matter of norms of use tied to proper function. The study of artifacts then turns out to be a branch of the study of social objects. It remains to be seen which of these approaches—if either—provides an adequate account of the relation between artifacts and social objects.[44]

Related topics: Race (Chapter 24); Sex and Gender (Chapter 25); Social Justice (Chapter 26); Social Construction (Chapter 31).

Notes

1 Artworks are standardly classified as a kind of artifact in both the literature on artifacts and the literature on artworks. See, e.g., Dickie (1983), Baker (2007: ch. 3), Levinson (2007), Thomasson (2014), and Evnine (2016: ch. 4).
2 See Fine (1994) for an influential argument against modal analyses of essence.
3 For a helpful discussion of essentialism about natural kinds, see Khalidi (2013: ch. 1). See also Tahko (this volume). For a helpful discussion of essentialism about social categories, see Mallon (2007). See also Mallon (this volume) on racial essentialism and Griffith (this volume) for a survey of different versions of essentialism and their applicability to socially constructed kinds.
4 Cf. Raven (2022: 134).
5 See, e.g., Witt (2011: 5–6). See also Marabello (this volume) on essences of individuals.
6 See Correia (2006) and Fine (2015).
7 The non-triviality constraint is meant to rule out essentialist truths such as "It is essential to *x*'s being a table that *x* is self-identical", which does not even partially individuate being a table from any other ways of being.
8 See Elder (2007) for an opposing view according to which the dependence of artifacts upon minds is causal and not constitutive.
9 See Devitt (1991: §2.2) and Thomasson (2003b: §1) on mind-independence as a criterion for realism. See also Khalidi (2015: §4) and Mason (2016: §4, 2020) for discussion of the mind-independence criterion in relation to social kinds.
10 See Khalidi (2013: §1.3) for a discussion of the idea that only real or natural kinds have essences and an examination of the criteria that essential properties must meet.
11 See Griffith (this volume) for a related argument which challenges essentialism about socially constructed kinds on the grounds that these kinds are mind-dependent.
12 Cf. Mason (2016: §4, 2020).
13 See, e.g., Thomasson (2003b) and Evnine (2016: ch. 3).
14 See Searle (1995: ch. 2) on the self-referentiality of social concepts. Cf. Passinsky (2020) on the response-dependence of social objects.
15 See Passinsky (2020: §4) on the objectivity of social objects.
16 See Pettit (1991: 588–90) and Johnston (1993: 106) on the link between objectivity and reality.
17 See Khalidi (2015: §4) and Mason (2020) for further arguments in support of the view that the mind-dependence exhibited by social kinds does not compromise their reality.
18 This example suggests that essence precedes existence in some sense, since the kind *witch* has an essence despite not having any instances. Philosophers who are committed to the view that existence precedes essence may therefore have to reject this example.

19 For further arguments in support of the view that social entities have essences, see Mason (2021: 3986–7) and Raven (2022: 135–7). See also Griffith (this volume) and Stoljar (this volume).
20 Similar definitions may be found in Baker (2004: 99) and Preston (2018: para. 4), though Preston herself rejects this view in favor of an alternative use-based approach. See Hilpinen (1992, 1993) and Baker (2004, 2007: ch. 3) for developments of the view.
21 See Hilpinen (1993: §4, §6), Baker (2007: ch. 3), and Evnine (2016: ch. 3).
22 See Korman (2015: 155, 2020: §3.3) for an opposing view. Korman argues that in such cases, no new object is brought into existence. Rather, an old object acquires a new property.
23 See, e.g., Thomasson (2003b: 592, 2009: §2) and Hilpinen (2011: §1).
24 See, e.g., Hilpinen (1993: 156, 2011) and Thomasson (2009: §2).
25 See Baker (2007: 51–3) on proper function.
26 See Baker (2007: ch. 3) for a development of this view.
27 This example is from Preston (2018: §1).
28 Thomasson's view also remains committed to an intentionalist conception of artifact function. For an alternative non-intentionalist conception of artifact function, see Preston (1998). See also Preston (2009) for a helpful survey of theories of artifact function.
29 See Koslicki (2018: §§8.4.2–8.4.3) for further objections to what she calls "author-intention-based accounts" of artifactual kinds.
30 Koslicki borrows this example from Carrara and Vermaas (2009: 135). See Kornblith (2007) for another case involving carabiners.
31 See Koslicki (2023) for another objection to Evnine's proposal.
32 See Preston (2013) for a use-based approach to artifacts. See also Koslicki (2023) for a discussion of Preston's view.
33 The proponent of a use-based view could appeal to the capacities or dispositions of the prototype in cases where the prototype functions properly. However, such an appeal would not secure the desired classification in cases where the prototype malfunctions. See Koslicki (2023: 221–6) for further discussion.
34 See, e.g., Kivy (1983, 1987) and Dodd (2000, 2007).
35 See Kivy (1983: 112–9) and Dodd (2007: §5.4).
36 See Fine (2003) for an influential monist reply and pluralist rebuttal. See King (2006) for a reply to Fine. See also Scarpati (this volume) for a discussion of the monism-pluralism debate and essentialism.
37 Note that Searle formulates his theory of social reality as a theory of social and institutional facts, not social and institutional objects. While it is not entirely clear what his view of social objects is, he is plausibly construed as denying creationism both in the case of artifacts and in the case of social objects. Thus, he should not be regarded as a proponent of what I call the "collective acceptance view of social objects". However, he may be regarded as endorsing a view in the ballpark, namely that it is essential to *x*'s being a social object that it is an object which has been intentionally assigned a new status with an associated function, through the collective acceptance of constitutive rules of the form "*X* counts as *Y* in context *C*" (Searle 1995: ch. 2).
38 See also Thomasson (2003a, 2003b), though note that Thomasson rejects the idea that social objects must be the intended products of intentional activity (see below). Cf. Tuomela (2002) for another influential collective acceptance approach to social practices and social institutions.
39 Two prominent alternatives are those of Searle and Thomasson. Searle maintains that what is collectively accepted is constitutive rules of the form "*X* counts as *Y* in *C*", where *X* is an object or class of objects, *Y* is a status with an associated function, and *C* is a context (Searle 1995: ch. 2). Thomasson maintains that it is principles describing sufficient conditions for the existence of members of the relevant kind (Thomasson 2003a).
40 The main debate here concerns whether collective intentionality is reducible to individual intentions plus mutual knowledge or belief. For a reductionist view, see Bratman (1999). For non-reductionist views, see Gilbert (1990) and Searle (1990).
41 Other prominent alternatives to a Searlean view include Guala's (2016) rules-in-equilibrium approach and Ásta's (2018) conferralist framework. However, it should be noted that neither of these authors develops a theory of social objects. Guala's theory pertains to social institutions, while Ásta's theory pertains to social properties of individuals.
42 Races and genders are further salient examples of social entities which are arguably unintended byproducts. See Mallon (this volume), Rosario (this volume), and Stoljar (this volume) for a discussion of these social entities.

43 See Haslanger (2000).

44 I would like to thank audiences at the University of Barcelona and the University of Neuchâtel, where versions of this material were presented. I would also like to thank Kathrin Koslicki and Mike Raven for helpful comments and discussion.

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