



<https://doi.org/10.23939/shv2025.02.042>

**Review of: Mallon, R. (2016). The Construction of Human Kinds. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-875567-8, 262 p.**

**Myroslav Danyliak**

Lviv Polytechnic National University

ORCID:0009-0002-6892-6961

*myroslav.danyliak.ki.2023@lpnu.ua*

(Received: 26.05.2025. Accepted: 31.07.2025)

© Danyliak M., 2025

In “The Construction of Human Kinds”, Ron Mallon explores how social categories such as race, gender, and sexuality are not natural facts but are formed through collective beliefs, language, and social roles. He argues that although these categories are socially constructed, they can still be real, stable, and causally powerful. The book combines philosophy of science, cognitive psychology, and social theory to develop a realistic version of social constructionism. Mallon shows how treating categories as “natural” can reduce moral responsibility and sustain inequality. He also explains how people often unknowingly perform social roles that they believe to be biologically grounded. This work is crucial for understanding how identity and structure are created and maintained. It offers theoretical tools to analyze social change and address injustice in contemporary societies.

**Key words:** *social construction, identity, gender, naturalism, moral responsibility.*

**Огляд: Mallon, R. (2016). The Construction of Human Kinds. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-875567-8, 262 p.**

**Мирослав Даниляк**

Національний університет “Львівська політехніка”

ORCID:0009-0002-6892-6961

*myroslav.danyliak.ki.2023@lpnu.ua*

(Отримано: 26.05.2025. Прийнято: 31.07.2025)

У своїй праці Рон Маллон досліджує, як соціальні категорії, зокрема раси, статі, гендери та інші ідентичності, формують наше мислення, мову та спільні соціальні практики. Автор демонструє, що ці категорії не є природними фактами, а радше соціальними конструктами, які набувають реальності через повторення, рольові очікування та інституційні механізми. Маллон поєднує філософію науки, когнітивну психологію та соціальну теорію для створення натуралістично-реалістичного підходу до соціального конструктивізму. У книзі пояснюється як уявлення про “натуральність” можуть впливати на моральну відповідальність і соціальну нерівність. Особливу увагу приділено тому, як люди поведуться у межах соціальних ролей, не усвідомлюючи їхньої штучності. Книга важлива для розуміння сучасних соціальних проблем і може бути використана для критичного аналізу суспільних змін. Вона є корисною і для дослідників, і для освітян та активістів.

**Ключові слова:** *соціальний конструктивізм, ідентичність, гендер, натуралізм, моральна відповідальність.*

In “The Construction of Human Kinds”, Ron Mallon examines how our thinking and practices shape concepts like race and gender. He explores how thinking and talking about kinds of people can bring those kinds into being and what this means for our understanding of human categories and our agency. The book asks whether categories such as race or gender are “natural kinds” discovered in biology or whether

they are socially constructed, created, and maintained by our cultural practices. Mallon’s aim is a naturalistic, realistic account of social construction: he does not reject science or reality. However, he argues that social influences can create categories with real causal power. He divides the book into three parts: the first builds an account of how human kinds are constructed; the second shows that this view is compatible with

a moderate realism; and the final compares his view to other approaches and discusses implications. Mallon contrasts his view with naturalist explanations (which treat categories as arising purely from nature) and with more radical anti-realism. His critique of naturalism is a key theme, especially in how claiming a trait is “natural” can be misleading. The book is richly argued but written in clear language, making complex ideas accessible.

The first chapter, “Race and Essentialism”, asks whether the way we think about race is historically recent or rooted in deeper human cognition. Many scholars have argued that race, as we know it, only appeared in the modern West. This Conceptual Break Hypothesis holds that before the 19th century, people did not think in racial terms, and modern race concepts arose alongside ideas of inborn, essential differences. Mallon summarizes this view: “No concept truly equivalent to that of ‘race’ can be detected in the thought of the Greeks, Romans, and early Christians”, and proponents of the hypothesis say modern race was “a substantial change in the concept» of human groups [Mallon 2016: 27]. Mallon grants that some aspects of racial thinking emerged historically, but he challenges the idea that essentialist thinking is new. He draws on cognitive science evidence that humans seem predisposed to see social groups as having hidden essences. In other words, he argues “no” – people have an innate tendency to categorize groups in essentialist terms, not just in modern times. As he writes, social constructionists who claim essentialist racial thinking is recent overlook psychological studies showing “essentialist thinking about human groups is itself, or is a product of, a psychological mechanism that is innate, domain-specific, and species-typical» [ibid.: 28]. For example, children and people in many cultures assume social groups have deep, unchangeable natures. This suggests that even if the concept of modern race took shape in history, the cognitive bias to think in natural-kind terms is universal. Mallon’s conclusion is a hybrid constructionism: he acknowledges some core features of how we think about groups may come from our psychology, while the specific categories (like “white” or “black”) are built by society. He explicitly rejects a simplistic “dual constructionism” that would make our entire racial thought purely social. Instead, he argues that “human category representations are not exclusively the product of social-constructive forces» and we should allow “partially nonconstructivist explanations” for some features. However, he also defends the more challenging claim that human categories are constructed. In short, Mallon says that while our minds tend to essentialize, who we apply those categories to and what content they have is shaped by history and culture. This combination of findings undercuts naturalism about race. Naturalists might say race distinctions exist because of genetic or biological reality. Mallon’s review of evidence implies the opposite: racial essences appear more like cognitive illusions. Evolutionary psychologists, he cites, treat racial thinking as a by-product of a general human predisposition to see groups as having essences, not as reflecting any real racial essences. Both social constructionists and cognitive scientists thus agree that nature does not simply impose common beliefs about race. In Mallon’s words, these accounts “undermine realist explanations of essentialist representations that explain their essentialist content by appeal

to biological reality”. By pointing out our innate biases, Mallon strengthens the social constructionist critique of biological naturalism: even if people behave as if race is natural, that behavior can be explained by our cognitive architecture, not genes or fixed biology.

Having examined race, Mallon turns Chapter Two into a general account of how social categories are constructed. He introduces the idea of social roles as the key mechanism. Roughly, a social role exists when a category of persons is labeled and commonly understood in a culture. Mallon says a social role exists if there is a label or concept for category C and a set of beliefs or stereotypes about C, which are common knowledge in the community. In other words, when many people share a definition of a category (like “doctor” or “man” or “wizard”), that itself creates a social role. Crucially, Mallon highlights that social roles can be covert. Many groups have roles everyone takes for granted as “natural”, even though they arise from shared ideas. He notes that in covert roles “the existence, or persistence, or specific properties of the category are believed to be the product of natural facts, rather than human decision, culture, or social practices” [ibid.: 69]. For example, people might see the category “woman” as just based on biology, not recognizing it as a role tied to social expectations. Mallon’s constructionist account insists that our concepts create real patterns: we have a word or image for a group, people know what it means, and individuals enter those roles. He explores how these representations produce real effects (see Chapter Three). However, the gist is that categories are made effective by our collective beliefs. When a society widely believes “all engineers are logical” or “girls play with dolls”, those shared beliefs help produce the behaviors and circumstances that make the category behave like a “kind”. So, here we have Mallon set up this framework by explaining how concepts, actions, and knowledge all feed into creating a role. He draws on prior philosophers (e.g., Griffiths, Appiah) to show that when knowledge about a group is shared widely and enough, it constitutes that social role.

In Chapter Three, the author asks: Once a social role exists, how does it become a stable, causally powerful kind? Mallon introduces the idea of “entrenched social roles”. These are roles reinforced by various mechanisms so that the category behaves like a robust kind. Drawing on philosopher Hilary Putnam and his students’ notion of homeostatic property clusters, Mallon shows that social categories can cluster traits together. He writes that if many properties reliably occur together for members of a role, then the role supports “induction, explanation, and prediction» just like natural kinds. For example, if a social role causes resource distribution patterns, lifestyle, and opportunities, those properties can co-occur stably. Mallon emphasizes that human practice can be part of the homeostasis. Citing Boyd, he notes that property-cluster kinds need not be purely biological; relational or social properties can join the cluster as long as they help make the kind useful for explanation. In Mallon’s words: “Causally significant social roles of the sort we have been discussing could be the homeostatic mechanism at the center of important property-cluster kinds” [ibid.: 103]. In other words, a social role can be the glue that keeps a category together. Ultimately, he asserts that socially constructed categories are real kinds, just

not biological ones. In a powerful summary, he writes: “On a category constructionist construal, a category (e.g., race or gender or dissociative identity disorder) may not be a biological kind, but it is not nothing either. It can be a real and important kind structured and sustained by the representations of the category, and by the accumulated effects of such representations” [ibid.: 104]. This is a key point: even if our beliefs and practices make a category like race, it can have genuine causal powers. If it consistently leads to a particular distribution of people, traits, and outcomes, it functions like a natural kind for our purposes. Mallon’s constructionism is thus realistic: it credits social categories with an objective status in the world, while clarifying that their source is human behavior and meaning.

In Chapter Four, Mallon probes the psychological and ethical impact of regarding categories as “natural”. He contends that seeing a characteristic as natural tends to lessen how much moral blame we assign to it. He creates the term “reduced attribution»: “Representing a human category C as natural decreases attributions of moral responsibility (or related moral evaluations) for instances of C, or for behaviors that are represented as natural consequences of instantiating C. Conversely, representing C as not natural increases attributions of responsibility (or related moral evaluations) for instances of C, or for behaviors that are natural consequences of instantiating C” [ibid.: 106]. In other words, if we believe a behavior is natural, we doubt the individual can alter it, so they are viewed as less culpable.

This mechanism generates a “moral hazard”: individuals are less motivated to avoid or oppose harmful behaviors if they think they are natural or unavoidable. Mallon demonstrates how this understanding has spurred some philosophers (e.g., Zinn on racism) to caution against naturalistic explanations. For example, if racist attitudes are seen as inborn, a racist has “reduced incentive” to cease, because they are excused by nature. In Mallon’s perspective, this “moral hazard” emphasizes why social construction is important: it reminds us that if we treat a category as socially contingent rather than fixed, we uphold the idea that people can modify harmful social structures. He also notes that this concept of reduced responsibility “intersects with social constructionism”: since constructionists say traits rely on social practices, seeing them as natural negates that insight. Mallon employs examples (from Sartre to emotion theory) to show that labeling something as an involuntary “passion” makes it easier to generate and excuse. In sum, he argues that believing categories are natural can have genuine social costs by lessening accountability, while viewing them as constructed highlights human agency and the potential for change.

In Chapter Five, the case of performance and agency, Mallon tackles a puzzling phenomenon: sometimes people perform their social categories (acting out gender norms, for instance) yet still talk about those categories as if they were innate. Mallon draws on social theorists like Ian Hacking and Judith Butler to discuss “making up people” and performative construction. He asks: If many people actively enact a role (say, what it means to be a man or woman), why do we treat that role as a fixed nature? Why does the fact that we all play these roles not make us see them as manufactured?

Mallon’s answer lies in the limitations of self-knowledge. He discusses psychological studies (e.g., by Nisbett and Wilson) showing we often lack introspective access to the real causes of our behavior. For example, people might choose clothes or hobbies without realizing they follow a social script. Mallon writes that we “fail to have introspective access to causal processes” [ibid.: 136]. Behind our thoughts and actions. We know what we desire or believe, but not how those desires were formed or connected. As a result, people form post-hoc explanations based on what seems plausible.

For instance, a man might feel pressure to work long hours because he has a deep-seated “natural” drive to provide. He will interpret it as part of his nature if he does not recognize that social expectations and learned incentives produced that drive. Mallon illustrates this with an example: if someone does not realize that wanting to act out a gender script serves other goals, they see it as a “primitive desire” rather than an instrumental choice. Thus, even though agents perform the roles purposefully, they do not notice this and continue to view their actions as naturally motivated. This “failure-to-locate” explanation shows why widespread enactment of a category does not automatically undermine its perceived naturalness.

Mallon argues that these self-deception effects have implications for agency. If we do not see how social roles shape us, we may wrongly feel less free. He concludes that our habitual blind spots in self-understanding “undermine our capacities for agency in nonobvious ways” [ibid.: 21]. In short, he shows that people can *become* their categories without believing it because they lack insight into the social causes of their actions. This keeps the fiction of naturalness alive and means we must work harder to uncover how our roles influence us.

In Part Two, Mallon steps back to address bigger philosophical questions about naturalism and reality. He begins by acknowledging the so-called “science wars”: debates over whether social factors undermine scientific objectivity. Mallon insists his view is metaphysically moderate. He stresses that his account is *local* and compatible with science: it only claims specific social categories are constructed, without denying that many domains (e.g., physics, chemistry) describe mind-independent facts. He writes: “The social constructionist explanations I have been developing in this book are metaphysically moderate: they are local, concerning only particular domains, and their obtaining within those domains is compatible with naturalism and with core doctrines of realism” [ibid.: 148]. He ultimately concludes that moderate social constructionism is itself a form of realism. Even when applied to categories like race or gender, it does not reject reality; instead, it claims that our understanding of that reality involves human practices. He says that “metaphysically moderate constructionism is a kind of basic realism even concerning those categories of which it obtains” [ibid.: 148]. This is a central corrective: Mallon wants to dispel the idea that calling something “socially constructed” means it is not real. He argues we can accept scientific findings and still recognize that people and societies partly make the world they study. Lately, he tackles concerns about stability and knowledge. Some worry that if social reality constantly shifts, we cannot have stable categories or knowledge as in science. Mallon counters that

social kinds *can* be stable enough. He notes that “in some circumstances social categories can achieve stability, and may even be more tightly coupled to our successful theories than natural kinds” [ibid.: 128]. In other words, if a social category is well-entrenched and systematically studied, our theories can be as precise as those in natural science, and this fact again affirms realism: human kinds can have reliable patterns. Mallon explains how terms like “race” or “gender” can refer to the constructed categories he describes, even if their meanings have shifted. He introduces the idea of reference-switching: early uses of a term might have pointed to a vague or different concept, but over time, as the social kind became prominent, the term came to pick out that kind. This resolves worries about talking of constructed kinds with our ordinary words. For example, someone might suggest that initially, “witch” referred to a supernatural being, and only later referred to social groups of people. Mallon’s externalist picture is a term that refers to whatever kind of features we see. As long as the social role produces predictable features, terms can latch onto it. He acknowledges tricky cases (like “witch”) but maintains that terms can successfully refer to social kinds once they become real phenomena. This chapter is technical about semantics, but the takeaway is that Mallon believes our vocabulary can track constructed reality through history. In the final chapter, Mallon compares his approach to other theories of social kinds, especially justice-driven metaphysics like Sally Haslanger’s. Some theorists say we should redefine categories (for feminist or anti-racist reasons) rather than use ordinary terms. For instance, Haslanger famously defines “woman” not by biology but by a person’s position in a social hierarchy. Mallon discusses these normative proposals but insists they are choices rather than necessities. He argues that metaphysical and semantic analysis alone cannot force a single correct definition of categories; such choices are underdetermined by theory and partly decided by politics. As he puts it, we must pick among ontological options by an “all-things-considered judgment” that depends on social context. In one passage, he notes that saying it is “reasonable” (but not required) to use our ordinary category terms for socially constructed kinds reflects this underdetermination. He gives the example of philosopher Keith Glasgow, who proposed adopting new terms for social racial categories because “race” implies a biological basis. Mallon disagrees that new terms are required: “In contrast, I have argued that if human categories like race or gender are covert social constructions with significant causal power, then it could be reasonable to consider them as the referents of our ordinary racial and gender category terms” [ibid.: 219].

This chapter highlights the implications of Mallon’s view. If we admit social construction, what do we say about our words? Mallon’s answer is pluralistic. He acknowledges that activists might prefer to reshape language (for example, to decouple “woman” from biology), but he sees that as a deliberate choice, not an unavoidable metaphysical truth. The important philosophical impact is to make us aware of these options: our language and ontology of human kinds are not written in stone but partly made by us. Mallon also emphasizes that our representations have political consequences (as in Chapter Four’s moral hazard). Recognizing that beliefs about race or gender are constructed underlines our power to change them. Ron Mallon’s book “The Construction of Human Kinds” is methodologically careful, interdisciplinary, and logically coherent. The author explains how human categories are discovered and made through shared representations and practices. He combines philosophy, psychology, and social science, offering a model that avoids radical relativism and rigid biological naturalism. His arguments are based on empirical studies and conceptual analysis, making his method rigorous and accessible. This book is highly relevant for Ukrainian readers. Ukraine is undergoing profound social changes and identity debates, especially concerning gender roles, sexual orientation, national identity, and minority status. Mallon’s framework helps us understand how identities like “man”, “woman”, “Ukrainian”, or “queer” are not fixed by biology but shaped by history, institutions, and shared beliefs. In a society where Soviet legacies, traditional norms, and progressive values often clash, Mallon offers tools for critically rethinking inherited categories. The book raises important questions for Ukrainian scholars: How do our national categories form? Are our definitions of gender based on nature or custom? Why do we explain social problems (like domestic violence or discrimination) in specific ways, and could we think differently? Finally, this book may contribute to solving social problems in Ukraine by encouraging public and academic debates about identity, power, and responsibility. By showing that our categories are socially constructed yet real, Mallon gives hope: if we make unjust structures, we can change them. This hope is a powerful message for any society in transformation.

#### БІБЛІОГРАФІЯ / REFERENCES

Mallon, R. (2016). *The Construction of Human Kinds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.