Introduction

The Kantian intuition and sensible constructivism

What motivates this dissertation is the desire to take a certain intuition seriously and find it a clear and coherent form. The intuition in question is inherited from Kant and is to the effect that aspects of the world may in some way be dependent upon or constructed by human thought and practices. Many people share this motivating intuition. Nominalists and conventionalists of various sorts have resisted the idea that nature has its own joints, independent of our carvings; in some academic circles a recent expression of this idea is that things are socially constructed. Sometimes the claim is epistemic, e.g., that people's social and conceptual practices influence their conceptions of that thing. But sometimes the view is meant to have metaphysical upshot, viz., that people's social and conceptual practices shape or determine or construct what that thing is. My thesis offers one way of articulating the impulse behind such a constructivist view.

Why articulate the Kantian intuition? The dominant picture of the relationship between the world we interact with and us and our thoughts in Anglo-American philosophy today has the world already divided up into properties and things and our task as attempting to devise concepts to map onto an already structured world. This dominant picture expresses the realist impulse that we thinkers and agents are constrained in our activities and conceptualization by a world that is independent of us. According to another polar opposite picture the world as it is independent from us is mere cookie-dough that can be carved up any way we want with our concepts. This latter picture isn't very popular these days, chiefly because it is taken to be too
closely aligned with radical subjectivism, voluntarism, or idealism, doctrines that are seen to involve lack of proper constraints on our thought, cognizing, and action due to an independent world. While I am not here to restore idealism to its former glory, or advocate any of the other -isms mentioned, I think that such views are often motivated by the Kantian intuition I think ought to be taken seriously. However, I think it possible to take that intuition seriously and find it form without sliding into radical subjectivism, voluntarism, or idealism. I do think that just as the idealist neglects the constraints an independent world puts on our action and cognizing, so the realist neglects the influence our thought and practices have on the world we live in. The realist mistakes what is of our making for the makings of nature; the idealist mistakes the makings of nature for our own making. My hope is to strike a balance between the two: to acknowledge and articulate the influence we have on shaping the world we live in, yet be sensitive to the constraints on our thought, cognition, and action.

Putting aside the broad brushes, what is the articulation of the Kantian intuition that I offer in this thesis? Briefly put, what I offer is a key component of an anti-realist essentialism, i.e., an account of what makes a property essential to an object that traces the source of that essentiality to our conceptual practices. The main claim is that essentiality—the property of being an essential property of an object—is *conferred* by ideal representatives of us concept users.

The idea that a property is conferred is familiar to us from Plato. Socrates asks Euthyphro: Is the action pious because it is loved by the Gods or is it loved by the gods because it is pious? The question is, as I would put it: Does the gods' love confer the property of being pious on the action or do the gods merely detect the property of being pious in the action and their love is simply a reaction to it?
This is an intuitive distinction but it is surprisingly hard to draw it precisely and to offer a way to show how a property is conferred. In my first chapter I provide a general strategy for arguing that a property is conferred that can be used to side with Euthyphro about any property drawing on the literature on response-dependence.

In the second chapter, I use that general strategy to argue that essentiality is conferred in a particular way. In the Euthyphro case the conferralist claim is that the Greek gods' love confers the property of being pious on an action. In the case of essentiality the subjects at issue are not gods of any nationality, but ideal representatives of us actual concept users. And it is not their love, but rather their finding it inconceivable that the object in question not have the property that confers essentiality onto a property of the object. This applies to any object, be it a chair, a tiger, or a human being. For example, my armchair's being made of wood is essential just in case ideal representatives of us users of concepts such as that of being an armchair would find it inconceivable that the chair not be made of wood, given that it is. Similarly, Tigo's being a tiger is essential just in case ideal representatives of us users of concepts such as that of being a tiger would find it inconceivable that Tigo not be a tiger, given that Tigo is one.

In the third chapter I offer a different argument for my conferralist account of essentiality. I take seriously our practices of engaging in thought experiments about the essences of things and show how my account vindicates those practices, whereas such vindication poses a prima facie challenge for the realist. What this shows is that not only can a coherent conferralist account be articulated; it has virtues the realist lacks.

Let us look at the proposal in detail.