Essence and Emancipation: On Jenkins's *Ontology and Oppression*

Asya Passinsky
Central European University
passinskya@ceu.edu

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Katharine Jenkins's *Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality* is a fantastic book which is required reading for anyone working in social ontology or the philosophy of gender and race. The book makes many important contributions, including articulating the concepts of ontic injustice and ontic oppression (chs. 1–2) and using these concepts to argue that the issue of whether trans women should be able to access women's spaces should not turn on whether trans women are 'really' women (ch. 8). Perhaps the most significant and far-reaching contribution is the pluralist conception of gender and race kinds which Jenkins puts forward in the central chapters of the book (chs. 3–7). While others in the literature have expressed sympathy for such a pluralist outlook, Jenkins is the first to rigorously develop and defend a pluralist framework for theorizing about these kinds. This 'constraints and enablements framework' will be my focus in this essay. What I want to argue is that while the framework has many virtues, it fails to perspicuously represent what metaphysicians of gender are up to. I will go on to suggest that the framework can better capture what I call 'the metaphysical project' if it is augmented with a notion of essence. I conclude by discussing several further benefits of augmenting the framework in this way.

1. The constraints and enablements framework

Jenkins's constraints and enablements framework (henceforth 'CEF') is meant to be a general ontological framework for theorizing about human social kinds which are constitutively constructed (2023, p. 83). Social kinds are kinds which depend in some sense upon social factors. Constitutively constructed social kinds are ones that depend 'constitutively' upon social factors, roughly in the sense that the definition of the kind must make reference to the social. For

example, the kind *landlord* is constitutively constructed because in defining what it is to be a landlord, reference must be made to social institutions, such as the institution of private property. Human social kinds are social kinds whose members are persons (e.g., *landlord*) as opposed to other kinds of objects (e.g., *dollar bill*). Thus, the CEF is meant to apply to kinds such as *woman*, *wife*, *Black*, *citizen*, and *landlord*.

Underlying the CEF is a particular background conception of kinds. Jenkins distinguishes 'thin' from 'explanatory' kinds (2023, p. 78–80). Any set of things which share some property in common comprise a thin kind. For example, the objects that are currently on my desk comprise a thin kind. Explanatory kinds are thin kinds which can figure in successful explanations, in the context of some explanatory project. For example, suppose that we want to explain why all these pieces of metal conduct electricity. A good explanation would be that all these pieces of metal are copper, and copper is a highly conductive metal. Thus, *copper* is an explanatory kind. Importantly, Jenkins takes social kinds to be a subset of explanatory kinds. This means that the CEF is meant to be a framework for theorizing about social categorizations that are explanatory relative to some purpose or project. Jenkins is very explicit about the fact that she is concerned with a specific variety of explanatory projects, namely those motivated by an 'emancipatory interest', which is an interest in "understand[ing] the world so as to change it in ways that combat oppression" (2023, p. 80). However, I take it that the CEF as such is not specifically tied to these emancipatory projects. Social theorists with other explanatory aims could also use the framework.

The core claim of the CEF is that when it comes to human social kinds that are constitutively constructed, "what unifies the members of such kinds is the fact of being subject to similar social constraints and enablements" (2023, p. 84). To illustrate, consider the kind *US citizen*. The CEF says that the members of this kind are unified by virtue of being subject to similar social constraints and enablements, such as being subject to the authority of the US government, having to pay taxes to the US government, having the right to reside in the United States, having the right to obtain a US passport, and so on. Another way that Jenkins sometimes puts the point is that social constraints and enablements are "at least partly constitutive" of the relevant kinds or of membership in these kinds (2023, p. 20, p. 87, n. 12). This alternative formulation makes clear that Jenkins allows for the possibility that other sorts of properties also play a role in unifying the members of the relevant kinds—for instance, it may be that the

members of the kind *US citizen* are also unified by virtue of meeting the stipulated requirements for US citizenship. Thus, the core claim of the CEF is fairly weak, and Jenkins argues that it is consistent with many of the more specific accounts of social kinds which one finds in the social ontology literature (2023, pp. 18–22).

Jenkins characterizes three main 'components' of the CEF: scope, breadth, and granularity (2023, p. 88–89). These are the parameters along which one bundle of constraints and enablements can differ from another. Scope is the context in which the constraints and enablements apply (2023, pp. 90–91). This can range from the very narrow (e.g., a particular workplace meeting) to the very broad (e.g., the whole world over the past several hundred years). Breadth concerns the type of constraints and enablements (2023, pp. 91–108). Jenkins identifies four distinct types: interpersonal, psychological, bodily, and environmental. Interpersonal constraints and enablements depend on the interpersonal behavior of other individuals. An example is a US citizen being able to obtain a US passport. Psychological constraints and enablements are ones formed in response to interpersonal constraints and enablements or other aspects of social structures. Thus, feeling like an imposter because one has internalized certain cultural stereotypes is an example of this type. Bodily and environmental constraints and enablements are ones which concern how people's bodies and material environments are shaped by social factors. Examples of these types include having worse health outcomes because of stress caused by racism and having access to single-user bathrooms at one's workplace. The breadth of a given bundle of constraints and enablements can range from minimal, involving only one of the four types, to maximal, involving all four types. Finally, granularity concerns the level of specificity of the constraints and enablements (2023, pp. 109–110). This can range from very fine-grained in the case of highly intersectional kinds such as *disabled Black lesbian woman* to very course-grained in the case of single-moniker kinds such as *woman*.

Having developed the CEF as a general framework (ch. 3), Jenkins goes on to show how the framework can be applied to the specific case of gender and race kinds (chs. 4–6). Here, I will focus on the application to gender. Jenkins's central claim is that there are at least three different kinds of gender kinds which contribute to the explanatory aims of emancipatory theorists: hegemonic gender kinds, interpersonal gender kinds, and gender identity kinds.

Hegemonic gender kinds have very wide scope (e.g., the whole world), maximal breadth (involving all four types of constraints and enablements), and a fairly course level of granularity

(2023, pp. 118–120). An example is womanhood as it is construed by Sally Haslanger (2000). According to Haslanger's account, to be a woman is to be systematically subordinated on the basis of perceived or imagined female sex. Since the unifying constraints and enablements in this case apply across different times and societies, involve all four types of constraints and enablements, and are maximally course-grained, this is a hegemonic gender kind. Such hegemonic gender kinds are explanatorily important for emancipatory theorists because they can help to explain large-scale patterns of oppression.

Interpersonal gender kinds have a narrow scope (e.g., a particular workplace), minimal breadth (involving only interpersonal constraints and enablements), and various levels of granularity (2023, p. 138). Ásta's (2018, ch. 4) conferralist account of gender provides an example of this kind. According to Ásta, to be a woman in a given context is to be constrained and enabled in certain ways because one is perceived as having the relevant 'base properties' by those with social standing in the context. Since the unifying constraints and enablements in this case apply in a limited context and involve only the interpersonal type, the gender kinds picked out by the account are interpersonal. The explanatory importance of such interpersonal gender kinds for emancipatory theorists lies in their power to help explain oppression on a more localized, small-scale level.

Lastly, gender identity kinds have medium scope (e.g., twenty-first century United Kingdom), medium breadth (involving psychological and bodily constraints and enablements), and various levels of granularity (2023, pp. 167–168). Jenkins's own (2016, 2018) account of gender identity provides an example of this kind. According to Jenkins, to have a female gender identity is to take the norms of femininity to be relevant to oneself. The unifying constraints and enablements in this case apply in contemporary Western societies such as the United States and the United Kingdom, and they involve psychological constraints and enablements having to do with which actions we experience as transgressive as well as bodily constraints and enablements that may result from these experiences. So, this is a gender identity kind. One reason such gender identity kinds are explanatorily important for emancipatory theorists is that they can help to explain the experiences of some trans people.

The application of the CEF to gender kinds nicely illustrates the way in which this is a pluralist framework. Where we initially may have thought there was just *one* kind—viz., womanhood—there turn out to be *many* kinds, including Haslangerean womanhood, Ástanean

womanhood, and Jenkinsian womanhood. Each of these gender kinds is unified by some particular bundle of constraints and enablements, and these bundles differ from one another with respect to scope, breadth, and granularity. Although Jenkins focuses on hegemonic, interpersonal, and identity gender kinds, the framework allows for the possibility that there are other gender kinds as well. However, the extent of the pluralism is constrained by two factors. First, each kind must be explanatory in the context of some explanatory project (more specifically, an emancipatory project, for Jenkins). Second, each kind must be a *gender* kind, where a gender kind is any kind that is intuitively 'in the vicinity of' our gender talk, "in the sense that if someone claimed that one of these kinds was the referent of our … gender talk, we might agree or disagree, but we would not think that the person was deeply confused or that there had been a fundamental error of communication" (2023, p. 117).[1]

2. The metaphysical project

The CEF is a very helpful framework. As Jenkins mentions, it helps us to position different accounts of gender in relation to one another in terms of the scope, breadth, and granularity of the unifying constraints and enablements (2023, p. 176–177). It can also help us to dissolve some apparent disagreements and to pinpoint the locus of other genuine disagreements (2023, pp. 177–179). Given an apparent disagreement, the CEF directs us to first ask whether the parties have the same explanatory aim. If not, and if all parties accept each other's aims as legitimate, then there is no disagreement. Arguably, this is the situation in the case of the apparent disagreement between Haslanger, Ásta, and Jenkins. On the other hand, if the parties do not accept each other's aims as legitimate, then we've pinpointed the normative locus of disagreement. This may be the best way to construe the disagreement between some trans-exclusionary feminists and their opponents. Finally, if all parties do have the same explanatory aim, then the CEF directs us to look for a disagreement over the relevant empirical facts or the explanatory power of the relevant kinds. I suspect that this is the right way to understand the disagreement between Haslanger and Theodore Bach (2012). For Bach's interest, like Haslanger's, is in large-scale patterns of sexist oppression across different times and societies.

[1] Elsewhere, Jenkins suggests that we may take a gender kind to be any kind that stands in an appropriate historical relation to the social structures which anchor hegemonic gender kinds (2023, pp. 186–187).

But the gender kind he fixes on is importantly different from Haslanger's insofar as it is essentially historical.

Nevertheless, I think that the CEF has a serious shortcoming. Namely, it obscures—or at least fails to perspicuously represent—what metaphysicians of gender are up to. Consider Haslanger's account of womanhood:

> *S* is a woman iff$_{df}$ *S* is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and *S* is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction (2000, p. 39).

While there is some debate in the literature about how to construe Haslanger's 'ameliorative' proposal,[2] Haslanger herself maintains that the proposal should be understood descriptively—namely, as providing an account of gender kinds in the world.[3] And importantly, Jenkins construes the proposal in this way (2023, p. 118, n. 2). Given this descriptive construal, it is very natural to interpret Haslanger as attempting to define or specify *what it is* to be a woman in the most basic and metaphysically significant sense. Call this *the metaphysical project*.

My contention is that the metaphysical project drops out of sight on the CEF. The reason is that on this framework, constitutively constructed human social kinds are identified only in terms of the scope, breadth, and granularity of their unifying constraints and enablements. Jenkins's analogy of a sound mixing board makes this vivid: scope, breadth, and granularity are like sliders on a sound mixing board which can be set to different settings (2023, p. 89). These different settings output different social kinds, and the outputs are to be understood in terms of the combination of settings. On this picture, the main task for a metaphysician of gender is to settle on suitable values for scope, breadth, and granularity given her specific explanatory aims, and to thereby pick out or identify a particular gender kind. That is *all there is to do* in terms of understanding the ontology of the kind in question, so far as the framework itself is concerned. But the metaphysical project, as I have characterized it, is something different from identifying a particular gender kind in terms of its scope, breadth, and granularity. This is evident from the fact

[2] See, e.g., Barnes (2017) and Díaz-León (2018).
[3] See Haslanger (2014).

that Haslanger's definition of womanhood does not consist in a specification of scope, breadth, and granularity—even if it implies values for these parameters.

To bring this point home, consider Jenkins's (2016) account of gender identity as another example. According to Jenkins's account:

> *S* has a female gender identity iff *S*'s internal 'map' is formed to guide someone classed as a woman through the social or material realities that are, in that context, characteristic of women as a class (2016, p. 410).

While Jenkins originally proposed this as an 'ameliorative' account of the concept of *woman*, in the book she construes the proposal in descriptive terms (2023, pp. 158–164). But again, given this descriptive construal, it is very plausible to interpret Jenkins as attempting to define or specify *what it is* to have a female gender identity in the most basic and metaphysically significant sense. This project clearly comes apart from that of identifying a particular gender identity kind in terms of the scope, breadth, and granularity of its unifying constraints and enablements. This is even more evident here than in Haslanger's case because Jenkins's definition of having a female gender identity does not make reference to constraints or enablements, even obliquely. *A fortiori*, the definition does not consist in a specification of the scope, breadth, and granularity of such constraints and enablements.

Jenkins might reply that it was never the aim of the CEF to perspicuously represent all of the projects that metaphysicians of gender are engaged in. After all, the framework is not intended as an all-purpose tool for metaphysicians of gender. But I would argue that perspicuously representing accounts of gender such as those of Haslanger (2000) and Jenkins (2016) should be an aim of the framework. For one of the main benefits of the CEF which Jenkins touts is that of integrating different accounts of gender, including Haslanger's, Ásta's, and her own. This aim of integration is better achieved if the framework is able to perspicuously represent these accounts.

3. Inquiry into essence

Thus far, I have argued that a shortcoming of Jenkins's CEF framework is that it fails to perspicuously represent what metaphysicians of gender are up to. I now want to show how this

shortcoming can be mitigated by augmenting the framework with a neo-Aristotelian notion of essence.[4] According to neo-Aristotelians, the essence of a given item tells us *what it is* to be that item, in a metaphysically significant sense.[5] Put another way, an item's essence is its very *nature* or *identity*. From a neo-Aristotelian point of view, questions about essence pervade philosophy. When we ask, 'What is spacetime?', 'What is a material thing?', 'What is it to be conscious?', 'What is it to be a person?', 'What is a social group?', or 'What is justice?', we are asking about the essence of the items in question. And proposed answers to these questions are to be construed as essentialist claims. For example, when a social ontologist maintains that social groups are structured wholes (Ritchie, 2013), she is to be construed as making a claim about the essence of social groups.

Crucially, neo-Aristotelians do not hold that essences must be comprised of properties that are intrinsic, microphysical, or natural. It is for precisely this reason that the neo-Aristotelian notion of essence is well-suited for social entities. Beyond this negative claim, neo-Aristotelians are united in thinking that (*i*) the notion of essence cannot be analyzed in modal terms and should therefore be taken as primitive for the purposes of present theorizing, and (*ii*) essentiality entails necessity (i.e., if an item is essentially thus-and-so, then it is necessarily thus-and-so). Furthermore, many of us neo-Aristotelians hold that the essentialist truths about a given item (or some subset thereof) provide a *real definition* of that item. Underlying this claim is the idea that linguistic items such as words and concepts have nominal definitions (e.g., the nominal definition of 'water' according to Oxford Languages is 'a colorless, transparent, odorless liquid that forms the seas, lakes, rivers, and rain and is the basis of the fluids of living organisms'), whereas worldly items such as things and kinds have real definitions (e.g., the real definition of the kind *water* is a substance composed of H_2O molecules). Finally, some of us neo-Aristotelians hold that essence plays an important explanatory role insofar as an item's essential features help to explain some of its surface-level features (e.g., water's chemical composition helps to explain why it is colorless, transparent, odorless, and the basis of the fluids of living organisms).[6]

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[4] The material to follow draws on Passinsky (2025, secs. 3–4).
[5] Representative neo-Aristotelian essentialists include Fine (1994, 1995), Correia (2006), Koslicki (2012), and Dasgupta (2014).
[6] On this explanatory role for essence, see Koslicki (2012) and Passinsky (2025).

There are several distinctions pertaining to essence which will be relevant for our purposes. The first is the distinction between 'objectual' and 'generic' essence.[7] An objectual essentialist claim seeks to answer a question of the form, 'What is *x*?', whereas a generic essentialist claim seeks to answer a question of the form, 'What is it to *F*?'. Thus, for example, the claim that the US Supreme Court is essentially a structured whole is objectual, whereas the claim that being a social group essentially involves being a structured whole is generic. Arguably, social kinds have both an objectual and a generic essence. Given a social kind *K*, we may ask 'What is *K*?' as well as 'What is it to be (a) *K*?'. For example, we may ask 'What is marriage?' — to which the answer may be something like, 'It is essentially a socially constructed kind whose purpose is to regulate family structures and relations'. We may also ask 'What is it to be married? — to which the answer may be something like, 'Being married essentially involves standing in certain legal and moral relations to another person.'

The second distinction is between 'full' and 'partial' essence. A full essentialist claim is fully individuating in that it individuates the given item from all other items. In contrast, a partial essentialist claim is only partially individuating in that it individuates the given item from some but not all other items. Thus, for example, the claim that water is essentially a substance composed of H_2O molecules is full, whereas the claim that crimson is essentially a shade of red is only partial because it does not individuate crimson from scarlet. This distinction is important when it comes to the question of whether all social kinds have an essence. Neo-Aristotelians typically hold that all items whatsoever have an essence, from which it follows that all social kinds have an essence. If this claim is taken to concern full essence, then 'gender nominalists' who think that there are no (non-gerrymandered) necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman will demur. However, if the claim is taken to concern partial essence—as I think it should be—then gender nominalists have no reason to object.[8]

The third and last distinction which will be useful for our purposes is 'immediate' versus 'mediate' essence.[9] The immediate essence of an item is basic in the sense that it is not the result

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[7] See Correia (2006).
[8] The weaker construal of the claim is more plausible even setting aside social entities. For there are non-social entities which appear to lack full essences. Shades of colors, such as crimson, provide a nice example (Dasgupata, 2014, p. 578). Note that the weaker construal of the claim is compatible with the claim that most or nearly all items have full essences.
[9] See Fine (1995, sec. 5).

of chaining together several essentialist claims, whereas mediate essence is the result of such chaining. Consider, for example, the singleton set whose sole member is the US Supreme Court. The claim that singleton Supreme Court essentially contains the Supreme Court is a claim of immediate essence. In contrast, the claim that singleton Supreme Court essentially contains a structured whole is a claim of mediate essence, as it is the result of chaining together the former claim with the claim that the Supreme Court is essentially a structured whole.

My proposal, then, is that we take every social kind that is countenanced by Jenkins's CEF framework to have at least a partial predicational essence. Thus, for every social kind that is countenanced by the framework, there will be at least some (non-trivial) truths of the form 'being (a) *K* essentially involves being *G*'. In the case of social kinds that have a full predicational essence, the relevant essentialist truths will be fully individuating and will therefore provide necessary and sufficient conditions for kind membership. Against this backdrop, the metaphysical project that Haslanger, Ásta, and Jenkins are engaged in can be understood as an inquiry into the essence of the relevant gender kinds. Specifically, Haslanger may be construed as attempting to specify the full, immediate predicational essence of hegemonic womanhood and manhood. Ásta may be construed as attempting to specify the partial, immediate predicational essence of a wide range of interpersonal gender kinds. And Jenkins may be construed as attempting to specify the full, immediate predicational essence of certain gender identity kinds.

For this proposal to be viable, there must be some way for Haslanger, Ásta, and Jenkins to initially pick out the gender kinds that are the targets of their essentialist inquiry. For just as the chemist needs some way of initially picking out the substance that she is studying prior to discovering its chemical composition, so too the gender theorist needs some way of initially picking out the object of her inquiry prior to uncovering its essence. There is, however, an important difference between the two cases: In the chemistry case, the relevant substance can be initially picked out through either ostension or a nominal definition. For instance, water can be initially picked out as the colorless, transparent, odorless liquid that forms the seas, lakes, rivers, and rain and is the basis of the fluids of living organisms. But in the gender case, it is hard to see how the objects of inquiry could be picked out through ostension. Moreover, since we do not have existing terms in our language for most of the vast plurality of gender kinds countenanced by the CEF framework, the relevant kinds also cannot be picked out by nominal definitions.

This is where the three components of the CEF — scope, breadth, and granularity — do important and indispensable work. For recall that the role of these three parameters is precisely to individuate one social kind from another. Thus, the kind of womanhood that Haslanger is inquiring into may be initially picked out as the one that has very wide scope, maximal breadth, and the most course level of grain. The gender kinds that are the objects of Ásta's inquiry may be initially picked out via their specific context and specific level of grain, as well as their medium breadth. And the gender identity kinds that Jenkins is concerned with may be initially picked out via their medium scope, medium breadth, and specific level of grain. Thus, my essentialist proposal does not displace the main components of the CEF but rather relies upon and complements them.

4. Further benefits

To conclude, I will discuss two further benefits of my proposed essentialist augmentation of Jenkins's CEF framework. The first is that it can help to clarify the core claim of the CEF. Jenkins formulates this claim in several different ways. First, she says that the CEF "treats human social kinds as being *at least partly constituted by* constraints and enablements" (2023, p. 76, emphasis added). Subsequently, she says that "what *unifies* the members of such kinds is the fact of being subject to similar social constraints and enablements" (2023, p. 84, emphasis added). Still later, she suggests that "constraints and enablements *ground* social facts about the kind membership of individuals" (2023, p. 185, emphasis in original). Now, it is not clear to me that these formulations amount to the same thing. But more importantly, each of these formulations faces problems.

The first is too indefinite. 'Constitution' can refer to many different relations (e.g., material constitution, composition, or metaphysical grounding), and so further explication is needed here. The second formulation is clearer, particularly since talk of 'unification' is familiar from the literature on kinds: kinds are said to be unified by those shared properties in virtue of which the members are members of the kind. However, if the core claim is understood in this way, it arguably fails to hold for some paradigm gender kinds. Consider, for example, *having a female gender identity*, as it is understood by Jenkins (2016). Jenkins suggests that this kind is unified by the psychological constraint of experiencing certain acts as transgressive or compliant, together with bodily constraints resulting from this psychological constraint (2023, pp. 166–168).

But it is a stretch to say that those who have a female gender identity have this identity *in virtue of* being constrained and enabled in these ways. Rather, what we want to say is that these people have a female gender identity in virtue of having a certain internal 'map', which amounts to their taking certain norms to be relevant to themselves. The same issue plagues the third formulation. We want to say that what metaphysically grounds *S*'s having a female gender identity is *S*'s taking certain norms to be relevant to themself, and not *S*'s being psychologically and bodily constrained in the ways suggested.

These problems are avoided if the core claim of the CEF is formulated in essentialist terms as follows: constraints and enablements figure in, or necessarily follow from, the predicational essence of the relevant kinds. To illustrate, consider again the accounts of Haslanger, Ásta, and Jenkins. For Ásta, constraints and enablements figure in the immediate predicational essence of interpersonal gender kinds, since being of gender *G* in context *C* essentially involves having a certain status which consists in certain constraints and enablements. For Haslanger, constraints and enablements figure in the mediate predicational essence of hegemonic womanhood and manhood, since being a woman (/man) essentially involves being systematically subordinated (/privileged), and being systematically subordinated or privileged essentially involves being constrained or enabled in certain ways. Finally, for Jenkins, constraints and enablements necessarily follow from the predicational essence of gender identity kinds because having gender identity *G* essentially involves taking certain norms to be relevant to oneself, and this necessarily constrains one to experience certain acts as transgressive or compliant.

The second benefit is that essentialism helps to account for the explanatory value of gender kinds for emancipatory theorizing. Consider again the kind *having a female gender identity*, as it is construed by Jenkins (2016). Jenkins maintains that this kind is useful for capturing the experiences of trans people such as Julia Serano, who reports having had "an unexplainable feeling that I was doing something wrong every time I walked into the boys' restroom at school" (Serano, 2016, p. 78, as quoted in Jenkins, 2023, p. 162). But if the kind *having a female gender identity* is understood wholly or primarily in terms of the relevant unifying psychological and bodily constraints and enablements, then it looks like the explanation of Serano's feeling that she was doing something wrong when walking into the boys' restroom is

that she was psychologically constrained to experience this act as transgressive. That is not a good explanation because the explanans is too close in distance to the explanandum.

Jenkins addresses this sort of worry in the case of hegemonic gender kinds, and her proposed solution there is to include in the explanans the full bundle of unifying constraints and enablements along with the 'anchors' that hold the kind together, which are things like social practices (2023, pp. 190–192). But this will not help in the case we are considering. For the augmented explanation would be something like the following: Serano felt that she was doing something wrong when she walked into the boys' restroom because she was psychologically constrained to experience this and various other acts as transgressive, and she was under certain bodily constraints as a result, and all of these constraints are held in place by things like the social practices of Serano's society. That is still not a good explanation. The additional constraints in the explanans do not do any explanatory work, while the social practices seem too 'rock bottom', going beyond what a satisfying explanation requires (at least in most contexts).

My preferred version of essentialism solves this problem in a straightforward way because one important role for essence is precisely that of explaining an item's surface-level features. Thus, the explanation of why Serano felt that she was doing something wrong when she walked into the boys' restroom is that she had a certain internal 'map' which amounted to her taking feminine gender norms to be relevant to herself. Since one of these norms says that girls should use the girls' and not the boys' restroom, she experienced using the boys' restroom as transgressive. My essentialist approach also offers a nice diagnosis of why the addition of further constraints and underlying social practices helps in the case of hegemonic but not identity gender kinds: it is because the additional constraints and social practices figure in the predicational essence of the former but not the latter.[10]

It is my hope that the foregoing discussion has brought out the ways in which the concept of essence is useful not only for abstract debates in the metaphysics of gender, but also for real-world explanatory projects which lie at the heart of emancipatory theorizing.

[10] It is clear in the final formulation of Haslanger's account that womanhood is defined partly in terms of shared practices and ideologies (2000, p. 42).

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