

Social Kind Essentialism

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Abstract: There has been widespread opposition to so-called essentialism in contemporary social theory. At the same time, within contemporary analytic metaphysics, the notion of essence has been revived and put to work by neo-Aristotelians. The ‘new essentialism’ of the neo-Aristotelians opens the prospect for a new *social essentialism*—one that avoids the problematic commitments of the ‘old essentialism’ while also providing a helpful framework for social theorizing. In this paper, I develop a neo-Aristotelian brand of essentialism about social kinds and show how it avoids the legitimate worries of social theorists. I then argue that neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism provides a helpful framework for a wide range of projects in social ontology and feminist metaphysics, including debunking projects, descriptive inquiries, and the project of achieving social change. I further argue that an essentialist framework is more useful than a grounding framework when it comes to certain legitimate theoretical and practical purposes in social theory.

1. Introduction

There has been widespread opposition to so-called essentialism in contemporary social theory. “Essentialism is widely rejected by feminist theorists today. Indeed, showing that a position is ‘essentialist’ can function in and of itself as a good reason for rejecting it,” observed Charlotte Witt a quarter century ago (1995: 321). In subsequent years, this anti-essentialist consensus only grew and solidified. As Ron Mallon notes:

Numerous articles and books in the humanities and the social sciences have been devoted to understanding the ascription of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, mental illness and other ‘human kind’ concepts to persons. What may be more surprising, given the enormous volume of this research and the diversity of its sources, is that much of it shares a common commitment to understanding the categories picked out by these concepts in a non-essentialist way ... the invocation of such a non-essentialism is ubiquitous in social theory. (Mallon 2007: 146)

To this day, anti-essentialism remains the dominant view among social theorists (cf. Ásta 2018b: 291).

Meanwhile, within contemporary analytic metaphysics, there has been a revival of interest in the notion of essence and the doctrine of essentialism. A lot of the initial interest was directed at specific essentialist theses, such as the essentiality of origins and natural kind

essentialism.¹ But more recently, metaphysicians have turned their attention to the notion of essence itself and its potential applications. And a distinct neo-Aristotelian perspective has emerged, represented in 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 the concept of essence plays a central role in metaphysics, and they believe that this concept cannot be analyzed in terms of the more familiar notion of metaphysical necessity. Many theoretical roles have been proposed for this non-modal concept of essence, including characterizing the very subject of metaphysics, providing an analysis of other important metaphysical notions, helping to formulate various theses of interest to metaphysicians, and explaining an object's necessary but non-essential features.²

The 'new essentialism' of the neo-Aristotelians opens the prospect for a new *social essentialism*—one that avoids the problematic commitments of the 'old essentialism' while also providing a helpful framework for social theorizing. This prospect is worth exploring for several reasons. First of all, while only a handful of social theorists have explicitly defended

¹ See, e.g., Kripke (1980) and Salmon (1981) on the essentiality of origins, and Putnam (1975) and Kripke (1980) on natural kind essentialism.

² See Fine (1994, 2011) for a discussion of the first three roles. See Koslicki (2012, 2018: §4.5) for a discussion of the fourth role. See also Lowe (2018) on using essence to characterize the subject of metaphysics, Rosen (2015) on using essence to analyze a notion of real definition, and Dasgupta (2014) on using essence to formulate physicalism.

essentialism,³ many have continued to talk in essentialist terms. For example, Sally Haslanger has said that she is offering a ‘real definition’ of gender (2014: 31), and Elizabeth Barnes has argued that certain debates in the philosophy of gender concern ‘what gender is’ (2014: 340). This appeal to traditional essentialist locutions—by theorists who are certainly not traditionalists about social matters—suggests that some version of essentialism may be indispensable for social theory. If that’s right, then we would do well to articulate just what that version is.

Furthermore, some social theorists have explicitly appealed to the notion of essence in their theorizing. Thus, for example, Witt (2011) invokes the notion of essence to explain the unity of social individuals, and Rebecca Mason (2021) appeals to a non-modal conception of essence to articulate the way in which social kinds are mind-dependent. These are relatively circumscribed applications of essence to the social realm, but they point to the possibility that an essentialist framework may prove useful for social theory more generally.

Finally, there has been a movement in recent years to develop a general framework for social ontology and feminist metaphysics, using tools and concepts from ‘mainstream’ analytic metaphysics. The work of Brian Epstein (2015, 2016), Jonathan Schaffer (2017, 2019), and Aaron Griffith (2018a, 2018b) has been especially influential in this regard. Notably, all of these authors employ the notion of metaphysical grounding but not the notion of essence. This is somewhat surprising, given that both of these notions are part of the neo-Aristotelian toolkit. And it invites the following question: what role, if any, should essence play in a general framework for social ontology and feminist metaphysics?

³ These include Witt (1995, 2011), Mason (2016: §3, 2021: §4), and Raven (2022: §2). See also Griffith (2024) for a sympathetic discussion of social essentialism.

Thus, the prospect of a new, neo-Aristotelian social essentialism is well worth exploring. Several social metaphysicians have already pioneered such an exploration. In the course of arguing that social kinds are essentially mind-dependent, Mason (2021: §4) defends the idea that social kinds have essential properties which constitute their nature or identity. Asya Passinsky (2021: §3) has argued that debates over the nature of gender(s) can be construed as debates over the essence of gender(s), as part of a broader argument that a Finean meta-metaphysical framework is hospitable to feminist metaphysics. And Michael Raven (2022: §2) defends the view that there are essentialist facts about social items, with the aim of motivating a puzzle about social essences.⁴ Yet none of these authors attempts to give a full-fledged characterization of neo-Aristotelian social essentialism and its concomitant commitments. This is understandable, as these authors only discuss the view while arguing for some other thesis—viz., that social kinds are essentially mind-dependent (Mason), that a Finean framework is hospitable to feminist metaphysics (Passinsky), and that there is a puzzle about social essences (Raven). But without a precise characterization of neo-Aristotelian social essentialism, it is difficult to ascertain whether this new essentialism does indeed avoid the legitimate worries of social theorists. And it remains unclear just how helpful of a framework it provides for social theorizing.

It is my aim in this paper to develop in detail a neo-Aristotelian brand of essentialism about social kinds, and to then show how this brand of essentialism avoids the legitimate worries of social theorists while providing a helpful framework for a whole range of projects in social

⁴ For a precursor to these discussions, see Witt (1995). Witt formulates the doctrine of gender essentialism using a more traditional modal conception of essence, and then defends the view from several objections.

ontology and feminist metaphysics. Along the way, I also endeavor to show that an essentialist framework is more useful than a grounding framework when it comes to certain legitimate theoretical and practical purposes in social theory—the upshot being that a grounding-and-essence framework for social ontology and feminist metaphysics is more adequate than a grounding-only framework.

Here is a roadmap of the paper: In section 2, I describe the three main objections that social theorists have raised against social kind essentialism. In section 3, I develop the neo-Aristotelian brand of social kind essentialism which I endorse. I then argue, in section 4, that this brand of essentialism avoids all three objections. The next three sections of the paper make the positive case that neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism provides a helpful framework for social theorizing. Section 5 considers the utility of the framework for social constructionist debunking projects. Section 6 considers how the framework is useful for articulating and carrying out the descriptive ‘essentialist project’ in social ontology and feminist metaphysics. Finally, section 7 considers the theoretical and practical benefits of the framework for the project of achieving social change.

2. Against social kind essentialism

Let me begin by clarifying the target of anti-essentialism in social theory. Anti-essentialists typically reject the view that some given kinds from social theory have an essence. Thus, for example, gender anti-essentialists reject the view that genders have essences. In their view, there is no essence to gender kinds such as *woman* and *man*. And anti-essentialists about race reject the view that races have essences. In their view, there is no essence to racial kinds

such as *Black* and *White*. Since the views being rejected concern kinds from social theory, let us call the target doctrine ‘social kind essentialism’. Given a kind *K* from social theory, the social kind essentialist about *K* affirms that *K* has an essence, whereas the social kind anti-essentialist about *K* denies that *K* has an essence.

It is important to distinguish social kind essentialism from other forms of social essentialism.⁵ One alternative form of social essentialism pertains to individuals rather than kinds. It says that social individuals or particulars have an essence. Thus, for instance, Witt (2011) maintains that a social individual is distinct from the human being or person who ‘makes up’ the social individual, and she argues that this social individual is essentially gendered. Another form of social essentialism pertains to the individual members of a given social kind *K*. It says that the individual members of *K* essentially belong to *K*. For instance, some would argue that individual women such as Kamala Harris and Oprah Winfrey are essentially women. Anti-essentialists in social theory do sometimes target these other forms of essentialism, especially the latter.⁶ However, the primary target of anti-essentialists in social theory has been social kind essentialism, and it is this specific form of essentialism that will be my focus in this paper.

It would be helpful at this point to give a precise statement of social kind essentialism, as its opponents understand it. The problem is that anti-essentialists rarely give a precise articulation of the view they are rejecting. Thus, we will need to take a more indirect approach to understanding anti-essentialists’ conception of social kind essentialism. What I propose to do is

⁵ Cf. Stoljar (1995) and Witt (2011: ch. 1).

⁶ See, e.g., Butler (1988). In Butler’s view, gender is a performance and so an individual’s gender is not essential to them.

to identify three main objections that anti-essentialists have raised against social kind essentialism. On the basis of these objections, we may reconstruct how anti-essentialists are conceiving of social kind essentialism. Specifically, we may reconstruct what anti-essentialists presume to be the problematic commitments of social kind essentialism.

The first main objection is the *diversity objection*.⁷ This objection says that a given social theory kind *K* lacks an essence due to the sheer diversity and lack of commonality among its members. Thus, for example, Elizabeth Spelman (1988) famously argued that prevailing conceptions of womanhood are in fact conceptions of White, Western, middle-class womanhood. These prevailing conceptions, in Spelman's view, fail to adequately account for the lived experiences and realities of women of other races, classes, ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures. Once we appreciate the rich diversity of women's lived experiences and realities, which result from factors such as race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and culture, we will see that there is no "golden nugget of womanness all women have as women," as Spelman puts it (1988: 159). A natural way of understanding Spelman's anti-essentialist claim here is that there is no set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being a woman. However, as Mallon points out, it is easy to construct a wildly disjunctive set of individually necessary and jointly

⁷ See Stoljar on the 'diversity argument' (1995: 264–7), Witt on the 'exclusion argument' (1995: 327–30), and Mallon on 'skeptical anti-essentialism' (2007: 149–52). Cf. Haslanger (2000: 37) on the 'commonality problem' and Jenkins (2016: 394–5) on the 'inclusion problem'. Cf. also Griffith (2024: 459) on the argument concerning necessary and sufficient conditions.

sufficient conditions for membership in any putative kind (2007: 152).⁸ So, a better construal of Spelman's anti-essentialist claim is that there is no set of non-gerrymandered individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being a woman, where gerrymandered conditions include wildly disjunctive ones as well as those formulated in terms of family resemblance or the possession of enough of a certain cluster of features.⁹

It is because there are no non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman that the putative kind *woman* lacks an essence, in Spelman's view. It is important to note that this step of Spelman's argument may be construed in either of two ways. On the one hand, we may construe Spelman's argument as directly targeting essence as opposed to existence. On this 'realist' construal, Spelman is assuming that the kind *woman* exists, and she is arguing that this kind lacks an essence because there is no set of non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman. On the other hand, we may construe Spelman's argument as directly targeting existence as opposed to essence. On this 'nominalist' construal, Spelman is arguing that there is no kind *woman* because there is no set of non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman; and since there is no kind *woman*, the putative kind *woman* lacks an essence.

⁸ Here is a simple procedure for constructing such membership conditions: For each member n of the putative kind K , choose some property P_n which is possessed by n . Now let Q be the disjunction of all these properties. Possessing Q is necessary and sufficient for membership in K .

⁹ The notion of a gerrymandered condition may be further explicated in terms of the notion of Lewisian naturalness (Lewis 1983). Roughly, the idea would be that a condition is gerrymandered just in case it involves a highly unnatural property.

Generalizing from the example of Spelman, we may construe proponents of the diversity objection as claiming that a given social theory kind *K* lacks an essence because there is no set of non-gerrymandered individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being *K*. And we may interpret this claim in either of two ways: On the realist interpretation, the claim is that kind *K* exists but lacks an essence because there are no non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in *K*. On the nominalist interpretation, the claim is rather that there is no kind *K* because there are no non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in *K*; and since there is no kind *K*, this putative kind lacks an essence. These two versions of the diversity objection make different assumptions about the commitments of social kind essentialism. The realist version presumes that the social kind essentialist is directly committed to the view that *K* has non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for membership.¹⁰ In contrast, the nominalist version presumes that the social kind essentialist is committed to the view that *K* exists, and thereby committed to the view that *K* has non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for membership.

Let us now proceed to the second main objection that social theorists have raised against social kind essentialism. This is the *constructionist objection*.¹¹ The constructionist objection says that a given social theory kind *K* lacks an essence because the commonality among the members of *K* is not natural or innate but rather socially constructed. Thus, for example, Iris Marion Young opposes essentialism about social groups such as Asians, women, and lesbians,

¹⁰ Cf. clause E1 of Mallon's characterization of essentialism (2007: 148).

¹¹ See Stoljar on the 'naturalizing argument' (1995: 262), Witt on the 'core argument' (1995: 324–7), and Mallon on 'constructionist anti-essentialism' (2007: 153–4).

on the grounds that social processes produce whatever commonality there is among group members:

A social group should not be understood as an essence or nature with a specific set of common attributes. Instead, group identity should be understood in relational terms.

Social processes generate groups by creating relational differentiations, situations of clustering and affective bonding in which people feel affinity for other people.

Sometimes groups define themselves by despising or excluding others whom they define as other, and whom they dominate and oppress. Although social processes of affinity and separation define groups, they do not give groups a substantive identity. (Young 1989: 260)

In Young's view, members of a social group share feelings of affinity towards one another and sometimes feelings of hostility towards others. These feelings, however, are the products of social processes rather than something natural or innate. Thus, the commonality among group members is socially constructed in the sense that it is caused by social factors. It is because the commonality among group members is caused by social factors that the group fails to have a 'substantive identity' or 'essence', according to Young.

More generally, we may construe proponents of the constructionist objection as claiming that a given social theory kind *K* lacks an essence because the commonality among the members of *K* is not natural or innate but rather socially constructed in either the causal or constitutive

sense.¹² The causal constructionist says that social factors cause members of *K* to share certain features in common, and because of this *K* lacks an essence. The constitutive constructionist says that the features shared by members of *K* are constitutively social, and because of this *K* lacks an essence. The constructionist objection, then, presumes that social kind essentialism is committed to the view that the commonality among the members of a social theory kind is neither caused nor constituted by social factors.¹³

Finally, some social theorists have raised the *variability objection*. This objection says that a given social theory kind *K* lacks an essence because what it is to be *K* varies across different contexts. Trina Grillo may be interpreted as raising this sort of objection when she writes that “an essentialist outlook assumes that the experience of being a member of the group under discussion is a stable one, one with a clear meaning, a meaning constant through time, space, and different historical, social, political, and personal contexts” (1995: 19). In Grillo’s view, there is no such stable experience when it comes to genders and racial groups.¹⁴ Thus, for example, there is no stable experience of being Black—a Black working-class man in the United States in 1980 experiences his race differently than a Black upper-class woman in Ghana in 2000, who herself may experience her race differently in the workplace and in the household. And so, the thought goes, *what it is* to be Black varies across these different historical, social,

¹² See Haslanger (1995, 2003) on the distinction between causal and constitutive social construction.

¹³ Cf. clause E2 of Mallon’s characterization of essentialism (2007: 148).

¹⁴ Thank you to [reference omitted] for raising this point in their commentary on an earlier draft of this paper.

political, and personal contexts. Because of this variability across contexts, there is no essence to being Black.¹⁵

Generalizing from this example, we may construe proponents of the variability objection as claiming that a given social theory kind *K* lacks an essence because *what it is* to be *K* varies across different temporal, spatial, historical, social, political, or personal contexts. The presumption of this objection, then, is that social kind essentialism is committed to the view that *what it is* to be *K* is not contextually variable in this way.

We have now seen that anti-essentialists in social theory have raised three main objections to social kind essentialism: the diversity objection, the constructionist objection, and the variability objection. Underlying each of these objections is a certain substantive conception of social kind essentialism and its concomitant commitments. Defenders of essentialism in social theory have replied to these objections by arguing that properly understood, social kind essentialism eschews the relevant problematic commitments. In particular, it has been argued that essences need not be natural or biological (Witt 1995: 325–6; Mason 2016: 843; Raven 2022: 135; Griffith 2024: 467); that essences need not supply non-gerrymandered necessary and

¹⁵ The variability objection is related to the diversity objection. Both are premised on a similar insight, namely that there is significantly more variation and diversity among group members than previously thought. Nevertheless, these are distinct objections because they draw different consequences from the observed variation or diversity. The diversity objection draws the consequence that there are no non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for kind membership, whereas the variability objection draws the consequence that what it is to be a member of the kind is contextually variable.

sufficient conditions for kind membership (Mason 2016: 844; Griffith 2024: 459–60); and that essences can be comprised of highly abstract, generic, or multiply realizable properties (Witt 1995: 329–30; Mason 2016: 844; Griffith 2024: 467–8). However, defenders of essentialism have said relatively little about what social kind essentialism *is* committed to.¹⁶ For the most part, they have focused on pointing out what the view is *not* committed to. Yet without a detailed positive characterization of the view, it remains difficult to persuade anti-essentialists that the problematic commitments are in fact eschewed.

What I propose to do is to provide such a positive characterization of social kind essentialism, using the neo-Aristotelian conception of essence which has become dominant within contemporary analytic metaphysics. I then demonstrate how social kind essentialism thus construed eschews the relevant problematic commitments. In so doing, I buttress the essentialist response to anti-essentialists with a more principled and foundational account of *why* and *how* the relevant problematic commitments are eschewed.

¹⁶ Thus, Mason characterizes social kind essentialism as the view that social kinds have essential properties, where the essential properties of a kind constitute what it is to be that kind as opposed to some other kind (2021: 3985); and Raven characterizes social essentialism as the view that there are essentialist facts about social items (2022: 131). Witt provides a somewhat more detailed characterization of gender essentialism using a more traditional modal, Aristotelian conception of essence (1995: 321–2).

3. Neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism

Neo-Aristotelians in contemporary analytic metaphysics have construed the concept of essence quite differently than anti-essentialists in social theory. The central idea is that given any actual or merely possible object x , we may ask the distinctively metaphysical question: *What is x ?*¹⁷ For example, we may ask: What is this statue? What is water? What is the Supreme Court? Furthermore, given any actual or merely possible way of being F , we may ask the distinctively metaphysical question: *What is it to F ?*¹⁸ For example, we may ask: What is it to be conscious? What is it to know? What is it to be a person? These questions are distinctively metaphysical in the following sense: In asking the question, we are not seeking an account of just any, or every, aspect of the object or way of being in question. Rather, what we are seeking is an account of the very nature or identity of the object or way of being. Thus, the ontologist who asks what the statue is will not be satisfied with the answer that it is the Metropolitan Museum's most precious possession, even if this is true. For this answer does not elucidate the very nature or identity of the statue.

Any attempt to provide a full or partial answer to a distinctively metaphysical question of the form 'What is x ?' or 'What is it to F ?' is an essentialist claim, for the neo-Aristotelian. Thus, for example, thehylomorphist's claim that this statue is a hylomorphic compound may be construed as an essentialist claim that seeks to provide a partial answer to the question of what the statue is. And the physicalist's claim that to be conscious is to be in a certain brain state may

¹⁷ See, e.g., Fine (1994) and Correia (2006).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Correia (2006) and Fine (2015).

be construed as an essentialist claim that seeks to provide a full answer to the question of what it is to be conscious. It will be useful to distinguish essentialist claims that seek to answer questions of the form ‘What is x ?’ from those that seek to answer questions of the form ‘What is it to F ?’. Let us call the former ‘objectual’ and the latter ‘predicational’.¹⁹ I will take objectual essentialist claims to have the form ‘ x is essentially F ’ (e.g., this statue is essentially a hylomorphic compound). And I will take predicational essentialist claims to have the form ‘being F essentially involves being G ’ (e.g., being conscious essentially involves being in a certain brain state).

Neo-Aristotelians take the concept of essence to be primitive and unanalyzable, at least for the purposes of present theorizing.²⁰ The concept is to be understood at least in part through its connections to other central philosophical notions, including modality, definition, and explanation. Let me briefly comment on each of these connections. The connection between essence and modality is that an essentialist claim entails a modal claim. Specifically, an objectual essentialist claim of the form ‘ x is essentially F ’ entails a modal claim of the form ‘necessarily, if

¹⁹ This terminology is from Fine (2015).

²⁰ I am glossing over a subtle issue here, which is whether the concepts of objectual essence and predicational essence are both primitive or whether one is analyzable in terms of the other. See Correia (2006) and Fine (2015) for arguments that objectual essence is analyzable in terms of predicational essence.

x exists, then x is F '.²¹ And a predicational essentialist claim of the form 'being F essentially involves being G ' entails a modal claim of the form 'necessarily, if x is F , then x is G '.²²

Neo-Aristotelians also hold that the concept of essence is intimately tied to the idea of real definition.²³ The guiding thought is that the notion of definition applies not only to linguistic and representational items such as words and concepts, but also to worldly items such as objects and properties. Thus, for instance, we may inquire into the definition of the word 'water' or the concept *water*, but we may also inquire into the definition of water itself. The former inquiry concerns the nominal definition of a linguistic or representational item, whereas the latter concerns the real definition of a worldly item. These are different inquiries, and they may yield different answers. For example, it may be thought that the nominal definition of the word 'water' is 'clear, liquid substance that flows in the rivers, lakes, and streams around here', whereas the real definition of water is 'substance composed of H₂O molecules'. It will be useful for our purposes to distinguish a full or complete real definition from a merely partial one. The former is

²¹ Neo-Aristotelians reject the converse entailment. That is, they reject the view that a modal claim of the form 'necessarily, if x exists, then x is F ' entails an essentialist claim of the form ' x is essentially F '. See Fine (1994) for an influential argument against this view. Fine argues that necessarily, if Socrates exists, then Socrates is a member of singleton Socrates. Yet it is not the case that Socrates is essentially a member of singleton Socrates, since Socrates's identity has nothing to do with this set.

²² As in the objectual case, neo-Aristotelians reject the converse entailment. See Correia (2006: §3) for an extension of Fine's arguments from the objectual to the predicational case.

²³ See, e.g., Fine (1994), Koslicki (2012), and Dasgupta (2014).

fully individuating in that it individuates the given item from all other items,²⁴ whereas the latter is only partially individuating in that it individuates the given item from some but not all other items. The definition of water as a substance composed of H₂O molecules is an example of a complete real definition, whereas a definition of crimson as a particular shade of red is an example of a merely partial definition because it does not distinguish crimson from other shades of red, such as scarlet.²⁵ While neo-Aristotelians are committed to the view that all items whatsoever have a partial real definition, they need not be committed to the view that all items whatsoever have a complete real definition. It may be that some items, such as crimson and scarlet, have only partial real definitions. The connection, then, between essence and real definition is that an essentialist truth about a given item provides a partial or complete real definition of that item.

Finally, neo-Aristotelians typically hold that there is an important connection between essence and explanation.²⁶ Specifically, an item's essential features are taken to play an important role in explaining some of its other 'superficial' or 'surface-level' features. For example, water's chemical composition is taken to explain why water is tasteless, odorless, nearly colorless, and able to dissolve many other substances. And a person's genetic makeup is taken to explain some aspects of their appearance, such as their natural eye and hair color. It is worth noting that a given essential feature may explain certain other features either causally or

²⁴ Note that this is not meant to be an analysis of the notion of full or complete real definition. For some recent attempts at analyzing this notion, see Fine (2015) and Rosen (2015).

²⁵ The example of crimson is due to Dasgupta (2014: 578).

²⁶ See, e.g., Koslicki (2012).

constitutively. In the former case, the possession of the essential feature causally contributes to the possession of the other feature, as when a person's genetic makeup causes them to have blue eyes. In the latter case, the possession of the essential feature partially grounds the possession of the other feature, as when water's chemical composition grounds its ability to dissolve many other substances.

Having articulated the neo-Aristotelian conception of essence, we may now formulate a distinct neo-Aristotelian brand of social kind essentialism.²⁷ The main idea is that given any actual or merely possible social kind *K*, we may ask the distinctively metaphysical questions, 'What is *K*?' and 'What is it to be *K*?'. Moreover, any such questions are presumed to have some non-trivial answer, be it complete or only partial. More precisely:

NEO-ARISTOTELIAN SOCIAL KIND ESSENTIALISM: Any social kind *K* has at least a partial, non-trivial objectual and predicational essence.

Let me elaborate on the key components of the view. The central claim is that any actual or merely possible social kind *K* has both an objectual and predicational essence. To say that *K* has an objectual essence is to say that there are some truths of the form '*K* is essentially *F*'. The

²⁷ My conception of neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism shares much in common with Mason's (2021) conception, though there are some notable differences. In particular, Mason does not distinguish objectual and predicational essence, and she does not attribute essences to merely possible social kinds. Moreover, it's unclear whether she thinks that essences must be fully individuating.

collection of all such truths comprises the objectual essence of *K*.²⁸ Likewise, to say that *K* has a predicational essence is to say that there are some truths of the form ‘being *K* essentially involves being *G*’. The collection of all such truths comprises the predicational essence of *K*.

The first qualification to this central claim is that the objectual and predicational essence of *K* must be non-trivial in the sense of being at least partially individuating. That is, the collection of all truths of the form ‘*K* is essentially *F*’ must individuate *K* from some other objects, and the collection of all truths of the form ‘being *K* essentially involves being *G*’ must individuate being *K* from some other ways of being. This qualification is meant to preclude the possibility that the objectual essence of *K* consists entirely of trivial truths such as that *K* is essentially self-identical (and *mutatis mutandis* for the predicational essence of *K*).

The second qualification is that the objectual and predicational essence of *K* may be merely partial in the sense of being only partially individuating. That is, the collection of all truths of the form ‘*K* is essentially *F*’ may not individuate *K* from all other objects, and the collection of all truths of the form ‘being *K* essentially involves being *G*’ may not individuate being *K* from all other ways of being. This qualification is meant to allow for the possibility that *K* has only a partial real definition. It is important to emphasize, however, that neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism is perfectly compatible with the view that all or most social kinds have complete real definitions. It’s just that the view does not stipulate that this is so. Instead, it leaves this as an open question to be answered by social theorists themselves. I take this to be a virtue of the view, as I think that social theorists are best equipped to determine whether a given social kind has a complete or merely partial real definition.

²⁸ See Fine (1995a: 275).

4. The objections reconsidered

I will now demonstrate how neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism avoids the three main objections raised by anti-essentialists in social theory. Let's start with the diversity objection. Recall that the realist version of this objection says that a given social theory kind *K* exists but lacks an essence because there is no set of non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for being *K*. Neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism avoids this objection because it does not require that social kinds have non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for membership.²⁹ First of all, the view does not require that there be *any* jointly sufficient conditions for membership in the kind because it allows for the predicational essence of the kind to be merely partial, and a merely partial predicational essence will provide necessary but not sufficient conditions for kind membership. Furthermore, the view allows for gerrymandered membership conditions because it imposes no restrictions on the value of *G* in truths of the form 'being *K* essentially involves being *G*'.

Let me illustrate this point by showing how neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism is compatible with Natalie Stoljar's (1995) 'anti-essentialist' view of gender, which is motivated by the diversity objection. In Stoljar's view, the concept *woman* is a cluster concept that picks out a resemblance class. Individuals who possess enough of a certain cluster of features—including female sex characteristics, a range of lived experiences typical to women, female-coded social roles, and identifying as a woman—are 'exemplars' of the class of women. Individuals who resemble any of the exemplars sufficiently closely are also members of the class. Insofar as there are necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman on Stoljar's view, these conditions are

²⁹ Cf. Mason (2016: 844) and Griffith (2024: 459–60).

highly gerrymandered. Nevertheless, the view is perfectly compatible with neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism. For neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism only requires that the kind *woman* have a partial, non-trivial objectual and predicational essence, and in Stoljar's view it does: Womanhood is essentially a resemblance class, and so the kind *woman* has a partial, non-trivial objectual essence. And being a woman essentially involves possessing enough of a certain cluster of features or resembling sufficiently closely someone who does, and so the kind *woman* also has a partial, non-trivial predicational essence.

Consider now the nominalist version of the diversity objection, which says that a given social theory kind *K* lacks an essence because there is no such kind, since there are no non-gerrymandered necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in the kind. Neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism avoids this objection because it says that merely possible social kinds also have essences. Just as there is some non-trivial answer to the question of what it is to be a witch (and what witchhood is) even though this kind does not exist, so too there would be some non-trivial answer to the question of what it is to be a woman (and what womanhood is) even if this kind did not exist. Neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism is thus compatible with a nominalist outlook.

Our view also avoids the constructionist objection because it does not require that the commonality among the members of a given social theory kind be natural or innate as opposed to socially caused or constituted.³⁰ The commonality may be constitutively social, as there are no restrictions imposed on the value of *G* in truths of the form 'being *K* essentially involves being *G*'. And the commonality may be socially caused, since the view is silent on what caused the

³⁰ Cf. Witt (1995: 325–6), Mason (2016: 843), Raven (2022: 135), and Griffith (2024: 467).

members of *K* to be *G*. Again, let me illustrate the point with a concrete example. According to Haslanger's account of gender:

S is a woman if and only if *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. (Haslanger 2000: 39)

On this account, there are individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being a woman, but these conditions are constitutively social because they involve being systematically subordinated. Nevertheless, the account is perfectly compatible with neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism: Womanhood is essentially socially constructed in Haslanger's view, and so the kind *woman* has a partial, non-trivial objectual essence. And being a woman essentially involves being systematically subordinated on the basis of presumed female sex, and so the kind *woman* also has a partial, non-trivial predicational essence.

Finally, let us consider the variability objection, which says that a given social theory kind *K* lacks an essence because what it is to be *K* is contextually variable. This is the most challenging objection for neo-Aristotelians because in their view, the essence of an item is fixed and immutable. And so, *what it is* to be *K* cannot vary across different contexts. Still, I think that neo-Aristotelians can adequately respond to this objection in either of two ways. The first appeals to a distinction between kinds and sub-kinds (or genus and species), where the former

are more general and the latter are more specific.³¹ For example, *utensil* is a kind while *fork* is a sub-kind. The apparent contextual variability of a given social theory kind *K* can be accommodated by taking *K* to be a kind that has different sub-kinds which are instantiated in different contexts. For example, we may take *Black* to be a kind that has different sub-kinds which are instantiated in different social, political, historical, and personal contexts. When we ask what it is to be Black, we may be inquiring into the nature of the kind *Black*, which is the same in all contexts. Alternatively, we may be inquiring into the nature of the specific sub-kind of *Black* which is instantiated in some given context. The answer to this latter question will of course depend upon the relevant context, and this is what explains the appearance of contextual variability in what it is to be Black.

While Grillo herself may be sympathetic to this reply,³² other proponents of the variability objection may be unwilling to countenance any context-invariant kind *K*. Neo-Aristotelians have a second reply for these anti-essentialists. This reply turns on the fact that neo-

³¹ Cf. Witt (1995: 329–30), Haslanger (2000: 38–9, 45), Mason (2016: 844), and Griffith (2024: 467–8).

³² Grillo indicates that her main problem with essentialism is that it insufficiently attends to different types of women and consequently mistakes one specific type of womanhood for womanhood in general. She sums up her critique with an analogy: “Spelman describes a group of pebbles on the beach; they are all pebbles, but they are all shaped and colored in different ways. Essentialist feminist theory has picked one pebble and asked it to represent all” (1995: 22). This analogy suggests that Grillo is willing to countenance a context-invariant kind *woman*, so long as this kind is not mistaken with one of its specific sub-kinds.

Aristotelian social kind essentialism is silent on the ontological question of *which* social kinds exist, and *which* social kinds are possible. The view only maintains that those social kinds which do actually or possibly exist have an essence. Thus, neo-Aristotelians may avail themselves of a pluralist perspective according to which *there is no* actual or possible kind *K* but only what we think of as specific kinds of *K*, which are instantiated in different contexts.³³ For example, it may be maintained that there is no actual or possible kind *Black* but only what we think of as specific kinds of Blackness, which are instantiated in different contexts (strictly speaking, these would not be kinds of Blackness, since *ex hypothesi* there is no kind *Black*). When we ask what it is to be Black, we should be construed as asking about the nature of what we take to be some specific kind of Blackness, which is instantiated in some given context. As the answer to this question will depend upon the relevant context, there is an appearance of contextual variability in what it is to be Black.

Let us now take stock. I have argued that neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism avoids the three main objections raised by anti-essentialists in social theory. One might worry, though, that neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism was never the *target* of anti-essentialists in social theory. Their target all along, one might insist, was some more robust form of essentialism. For instance, the view that social kinds have an essence, where this essence is comprised of a set of properties which are (i) non-gerrymandered, (ii) individually necessary and jointly sufficient for

³³ Cf. Mason (2016: 844). See also Dembroff (2018: 32) and López de Sa (ms.) for a pluralist view of gender kinds, and Jenkins (2023: chs. 4–6) for a pluralist view of race and gender kinds.

kind membership, (iii) natural, (iv) intrinsic, and (v) explanatory.³⁴ But if that's right, then there was never any substantive disagreement between anti-essentialists in social theory and neo-Aristotelians in the first place. So, the whole exercise of demonstrating how neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism avoids social theorists' concerns was idle.³⁵

Though it is hard to pinpoint the exact target of anti-essentialists in social theory, I agree that they likely have in mind something stronger than neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism. Nevertheless, within social theory there continues to be widespread hostility and aversion to all views going under the label of 'essentialism'. This is unfortunate, in my view, given the potential utility of a neo-Aristotelian essentialist framework for social theorizing. But social theorists will only be receptive to such a framework if they are convinced that it avoids their legitimate concerns. It is for this reason that I think there is significant value in demonstrating just how neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism eschews the relevant problematic commitments. It is even more important, though, to demonstrate just how neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism is fruitful and beneficial for social theorizing. The rest of the paper takes up this positive project.

³⁴ See Mallon's characterization of essentialism (2007: 147–8). Cf. Griffith's characterization of 'Strong Essentialism' (2024: 458). Another possibility is that anti-essentialists' real target all along was the view that social kinds have a *complete* real definition (i.e., a real definition which is fully individuating).

³⁵ Thank you to an anonymous referee for pressing this worry.

5. The debunking project

I begin by considering the benefits of the essentialist framework for what Haslanger (2003) has called the ‘debunking project’. The aim of this project is to debunk our ordinary conception of a given human kind K by showing that K is not natural or biological but rather socially constructed. For example, the debunking project around sex aims to show that our ordinary conception of sex as a biological category is mistaken, and that sex is rather a socially constructed category. The notion of social construction is central to this project, but it is not altogether clear how this notion is to be understood. Haslanger’s influential proposal is that the relevant notion is to be understood as follows:

Constitutive Construction (CC): A given item is constitutively constructed iff in defining it we must make reference to social factors. (Haslanger 1995: 98)

This definitional account of constitutive construction may itself be understood in two different ways, the first being a linguistic construal and the second a real definition construal:

Linguistic Constitutive Construction (LCC): A given item is constitutively constructed iff in defining our term for it or our concept of it we must make reference to social factors.

Real Constitutive Construction (RCC): A given item is constitutively constructed iff in giving a real definition of it we must make reference to social factors.³⁶

I argue that fans of Haslanger's account should adopt RCC rather than LCC, and moreover, that RCC should be understood in essentialist terms.³⁷ The problem with LCC is that it fails to classify certain social constructionist positions as such. Consider, for example, a theorist who accepts that the term 'disabled' and the concept *disabled* are definable in physical and psychological terms, for instance, 'subject to the same constraints as individuals around here who have such-and-such physical or psychological features'. However, this theorist denies that this linguistic definition reveals *what it is* to be disabled. In her view, what it is to be disabled is to have a certain social status which is conferred on the basis of certain physical or psychological features (Ásta 2018a: 44–5). This is a social constructionist view of disability. Yet LCC does not classify it as such because the view does not hold that the definition of the word 'disabled' or the concept *disabled* must make reference to social factors. In contrast, RCC correctly classifies the view as social constructionist because the view holds that the real definition of being disabled must make reference to social factors.

A further argument in favor of RCC is that it can help to elucidate the debunking aspect of social constructionist projects concerned with politically important social identities, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability. In particular, a proponent of RCC can maintain that to 'debunk' our ordinary conception of such kinds is to show that there is a specific kind of

³⁶ Some of Haslanger's remarks point to this second interpretation of her view. See especially (1995: 120, n. 12).

³⁷ Cf. Griffith (2024: 465).

mismatch between the commonly accepted linguistic definitions of our terms or concepts for these kinds, on the one hand, and the real definitions of these kinds, on the other. Namely, it is to show that the former only make reference to physical or biological factors, whereas the latter make reference to social factors.

It is worth noting that a ground-theoretic account of social construction, such as Schaffer's (2017) or Griffith's (2018b), is not as helpful in this regard. The reason is that metaphysical grounds are not meant to be the worldly analogues of linguistic or nominal definitions, in the way that real definitions are. So, the relevant mismatch is not plausibly construed as a mismatch between linguistic definitions, on the one hand, and metaphysical grounds, on the other. Nor is it plausibly construed as a mismatch between the commonly accepted metaphysical grounds of someone's being *K* and the real metaphysical grounds of someone's being *K*. For many ordinary people do not have views about the metaphysical grounds of, say, someone's being female, disabled, or Black. In contrast, most ordinary people do have views about the linguistic definitions of words and concepts such as 'female', 'disabled', and 'Black'. Of course, proponents of ground-theoretic accounts of social construction may maintain that they are not in the business of elucidating debunking. Their aims lie elsewhere, for instance, in freeing social ontology of obscure relations. But that is just to say that a ground-theoretic framework is not particularly helpful for the purpose at hand.

If we adopt RCC, then we are left with the task of either explicating the relevant notion of real definition or providing an alternative formulation of the view which does not directly invoke this notion. This is where our essentialist framework proves useful. Recall that for neo-Aristotelians, any essentialist truth about a given item provides a partial real definition of that

item. RCC may thus be construed in essentialist terms as follows: a given item is constitutively constructed iff some essentialist truth about it makes reference to social factors.

A few small modifications are in order. First, the scope of RCC should be restricted to kinds, since the debunking project primarily concerns human kinds. Second, it should be made explicit that the relevant essentialist truths are predicational rather than objectual, since debunkers are primarily concerned with the predicational essence and not the objectual essence of a given kind. For example, the debunker of sexuality is primarily concerned with the question of what it is to be female or male and not the question of what the kinds *female* and *male* are. Indeed, the debunker and her opponent might even agree that the kinds *female* and *male* are essentially social if they both subscribe to a view of kinds according to which all kinds whatsoever are, by their very nature, products of our social practices. Third and lastly, a non-triviality constraint should be incorporated into the analysis. Taking these modifications into account, we get the following essentialist construal of RCC:

Essentialist Constitutive Construction (ECC): A kind *K* is constitutively constructed iff some non-trivial predicational essentialist truth about *K* makes reference to social factors.

My contention is that ECC provides a clearer and more perspicuous analysis of the notion of social construction than Haslanger's original CC. And so, I suggest, Haslangerians should opt for ECC over CC.

6. The essentialist project

Let us now consider the benefits of our essentialist framework for another important descriptive project in social theory which I call the ‘essentialist project’. This project aims to give an account of the nature or identity of a given social kind. Many feminist metaphysicians and social ontologists are engaged in this project, including theorists that are often labeled ‘anti-essentialists’. Consider, for example, Haslanger’s and Ásta’s theories of gender. According to Haslanger, gender is a hierarchical social structure and being a member of a given gender involves occupying a certain position in this structure on the basis of presumed sex (2000: §3). According to Ásta, gender is rather a conferred social status and being a member of a given gender in a context involves being subject to certain constraints and enablements in virtue of other people’s perceptions in that context (2018a: §4.2). Haslanger and Ásta are both giving an account of what gender is and what it is to be a member of a given gender kind.³⁸ To take another example, consider Francesco Guala’s and John Searle’s theories of money. In Guala’s view, money is a functionalist kind and being money involves fulfilling the functions of medium of exchange, store of value, and unit of account (2016: ch. 3). In Searle’s view, money is rather a deontic kind and being money involves being such that the bearer has a right to use it as a means to settle public or private debts (1995: ch. 4). These are interestingly different theories of what money is and what it is for something to be money.

Our essentialist framework provides a simple and straightforward interpretation of the essentialist project, namely that it aims to articulate the objectual and/or predicational essence of

³⁸ Cf. Barnes (2014: 340).

some social kind.³⁹ For example, Haslanger and Ásta may be construed as offering different accounts of the objectual essence of the kind *gender* as well as different accounts of the predicational essence of being a woman and being a man. Specifically, we may construe Haslanger as endorsing the following essentialist claims:

(O_H) Gender is essentially a hierarchical social structure.

(P_H) Being a woman essentially involves being systematically subordinated on the basis of perceived or imagined female sex.

And we may construe Ásta as endorsing the following essentialist claims:

(O_A) Gender is essentially a conferred social status.

(P_A) Being a woman in a given context essentially involves being subject to certain constraints and enablements in virtue of other people's perceptions in that context.

I have assumed that Haslanger and Ásta are offering competing accounts of one and the same thing, namely gender and particular ways of being gendered. Gender pluralists, such as Robin Dembroff (2018: 32) and Katharine Jenkins (2023: chs. 4–6), might challenge this

³⁹ Cf. Mason (2021: 3990–1), Passinsky (2021: 943–5), Raven (2021: 136), and Griffith (2024: 465–6).

assumption and contend that Haslanger and Ásta are in fact offering compatible accounts of different things, namely Haslangerean gender and Ástanean gender. It is worth emphasizing that our essentialist framework is perfectly compatible with such a pluralist dissolution of the debate—Haslanger could be construed as giving an account of the objectual and predicational essence of Haslangerean gender and womanhood, while Ásta could be construed as giving an account of the objectual and predicational essence of Ástanean gender and womanhood. Likewise, we could construe Guala and Searle as offering compatible accounts of the essences of different items: money proper in the case of Guala and currency or legal tender in the case of Searle.⁴⁰ I take it to be a virtue of our framework that it allows for this broad flexibility in how we interpret any given debate, since this is a substantive issue which should not be prejudged by the framework itself.

Having presented my interpretation of the essentialist project, let me now comment on some of the benefits of construing positions and debates in social theory in these terms. First of all, the essentialist construal hews very closely to how many feminist metaphysicians and social ontologists already express their claims. For example, Haslanger explicitly formulates her accounts of being a woman and being a man as definitions. And she even states in a later paper, “I am offering a theory of *what gender is*. ... This is the goal of real definition” (2014: 31, emphasis in original). Guala also understands his account of money in definitional terms, calling it a “functionalist definition of money” which says that money *is* whatever fulfills the functions of money (2016: 35).

⁴⁰ Some of Guala’s remarks suggest that he may be amenable to such a dissolution of the debate. See especially Guala (2016: 169).

Some theorists have suggested that claims such as those made by Haslanger and Guala may be understood in simple grounding terms. For example, Mari Mikkola suggests that Haslanger may be construed as maintaining that someone's being a woman is grounded in their being systematically subordinated on the basis of perceived or imagined female sex (2015: 787).⁴¹ However, this simple ground-theoretic construal of Haslanger's claim is less faithful to the original than an essentialist construal because grounding claims are informally expressed using locutions such as 'in virtue of' or 'because', not locutions such as 'what it is to be'. Arguably, a more sophisticated ground-theoretic construal of Haslanger's claim could capture its definitional quality.⁴² For instance, grounding theorists could adopt Gideon Rosen's modal ground-theoretic analysis of real definition, according to which for φ to define F is for it to be the case that necessarily, when a thing is F or φ , it is F or φ in virtue of being φ (2015: 199). They could then construe Haslanger as maintaining that necessarily, when someone is a woman or is systematically subordinated on the basis of perceived or imagined female sex, they are a woman or systematically subordinated on the basis of perceived or imagined female sex in virtue of being systematically subordinated on the basis of perceived or imagined female sex. But notice that this ground-theoretic construal of Haslanger's claim is significantly more complicated

⁴¹ Cf. Schaffer (2017: 2454, n. 6 and §3.2). Cf. also Griffith (2018b: 398–9) for a more nuanced ground-theoretic construal of Haslanger's account.

⁴² Thank you to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.

than my proposed essentialist construal. Moreover, it relies upon a controversial modal ground-theoretic analysis of real definition.⁴³

Another virtue of our essentialist construal is that it can straightforwardly account for the modal implications of various views.⁴⁴ For example, it is standardly assumed that Haslanger's analysis of being a woman implies that it is impossible for there to be women who are not subordinated.⁴⁵ That is why, for Haslanger, "it is part of the project of feminism to bring about a day when there are no more women" (2000: 46). The essentialist construal of Haslanger's analysis can account for this modal implication because a predicational essentialist claim of the form 'being *F* essentially involves being *G*' entails a modal claim of the form 'necessarily, if *x* is *F*, then *x* is *G*'. It follows that P_H entails that necessarily, if someone is a woman, then they are systematically subordinated on the basis of perceived or imagined female sex—and so it is impossible for someone to be a woman without being subordinated.

In contrast, a simple ground-theoretic construal of Haslanger's analysis, such as Mikkola's (2015: 787), cannot account for this modal implication because grounds are merely sufficient, but not necessary, for what they ground. To illustrate, consider the disjunctive fact that there are humans or there are flying donkeys. At the actual world *w*, this fact is fully grounded in the fact that there are humans. But at another possible world *w'*, in which there are no humans but

⁴³ Indeed, Rosen himself rejects this modal ground-theoretic analysis of real definition in favor of an essentialist ground-theoretic analysis (2015: 199–200).

⁴⁴ Cf. Passinsky (2021: §3).

⁴⁵ Thus, for instance, Mikkola says that on Haslanger's account, "women and men could not exist, unless sexist oppression existed" (2011: 72).

there are flying donkeys, this fact is fully grounded in the fact that there are flying donkeys. For this reason, a grounding claim of the form ‘someone’s being *F* is grounded in their being *G*’ does not entail a modal claim of the form ‘necessarily, if someone is *F*, then they are *G*’.⁴⁶ And so, the claim that someone’s being a woman is grounded in their being systematically subordinated on the basis of perceived or imagined female sex does not entail that necessarily, if someone is a woman, then they are systematically subordinated on the basis of perceived or imagined female sex. For all that has been said, it could be that facts about womanhood are grounded in one way at the actual world and in another way at other possible worlds. To adequately account for the modal implications of Haslanger’s analysis, grounding theorists would have to adopt a more sophisticated modal ground-theoretic construal of Haslanger’s view, such as the one considered above. But again, our own essentialist construal has the advantage of being simpler and more straightforward.

Finally, the essentialist construal equips us with a methodology for adjudicating debates over the nature of a given social kind. Since an item’s essential properties must explain a range of its superficial features, competing accounts of the essence of a given item may be compared on the basis of how well they explain that item’s superficial features. For example, competing accounts of the predicational essence of being a woman may be compared on the basis of how

⁴⁶ Of course, there may be cases in which both of these claims are true. For example, it is plausible that someone’s being human is grounded in their being a bipedal primate mammal; and that necessarily, if someone is a bipedal primate mammal, then they are human. But importantly, it is not because of the grounding connection between being human and being a bipedal primate mammal that this modal claim is true. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.

well they explain the superficial features that women qua women share. The first step in adjudicating between such competing accounts would be to ascertain the superficial features that women qua women share. I take it that this is precisely what social scientists are doing when they formulate statistical generalizations about women to the effect that women are more likely than men to drop out of the workforce when they have a family, women tend to do a disproportionate amount of caregiving and housework, women are less likely than men to get promoted in certain professions, and so on. The second step would be to compare the views on offer vis-à-vis their ability to explain these apparent features of women qua women. This is no easy task, but it is clear enough how to proceed.

In contrast, a ground-theoretic construal does not straightforwardly equip us with such a methodology. The reason is that grounding connects up differently to explanation than essence does. On the dominant approach, grounding relates facts or propositions, and the grounds of a given fact or proposition explain (or back an explanation of) that fact or proposition.⁴⁷ For example, the grounds of Kamala's being a woman explain why Kamala is a woman. But there is nothing in the standard conception of grounding which requires that the grounds of Kamala's being a woman explain the superficial features that Kamala possesses qua woman (e.g., being more likely than a man to drop out of the workforce upon having a family, being less likely than a man to get promoted in certain professions, etc.). And so, there is nothing in the standard

⁴⁷ In what follows, I assume a unionist conception of grounding according to which grounding is a form of explanation. Separatists who take grounding to be a form of determination which backs explanation can recast my example in their preferred terms. See Raven (2015: §5) for the distinction between unionism and separatism.

conception of grounding which would recommend adjudicating between competing accounts of womanhood on the basis of how well they can explain the superficial features that women qua women share.

7. The project of social change

Thus far, I have argued that an essentialist framework is beneficial for several theoretical projects in social theory. But many social constructionists have practical as well as theoretical aims—their goal is to not only describe social reality, but to change it for the better.⁴⁸ Let us call this the ‘project of social change’. Since social kind essentialism has a reputation for being inimical to social change, it is important to consider whether our essentialist framework is conducive to this project. In this final section of the paper, I argue that the framework is in fact both theoretically and practically beneficial for the project of social change.⁴⁹

The main theoretical benefit is that the essentialist framework elucidates a central debate among social constructionists seeking social change, namely the debate between *abolitionists* and *revisionists*. Abolitionists maintain that we should abolish a given kind *K* or bring it about that there are no more instances of *K*, whereas revisionists maintain that we should revise *K* or its instances without abolishing them. For example, Haslanger (2000) is a gender abolitionist insofar

⁴⁸ See Hacking (1999: 19–21) on reformist, rebellious, and revolutionary social constructionists, and Díaz-León (2013: §5) on social construction and the possibility of social change.

⁴⁹ Cf. Mason (2021: §4.3) on the compatibility of social kind essentialism and emancipatory projects in social metaphysics. Cf. also Raven (2021: 136–7) and Griffith (2024: 467).

as she thinks that we should bring it about that there are no more instances of the kinds *woman* and *man*,⁵⁰ whereas Mikkola (2011) is a gender revisionist insofar as she thinks that we should revise womanhood and manhood without abolishing them. This is an important debate in the philosophy of gender—and one that has serious practical ramifications. Consider, for instance, the recently passed law in California which adds a third gender option (‘non-binary’) to driver’s licenses and identification cards. A gender revisionist would likely support this revision of the existing gender categories as a step in the right direction. In contrast, a gender abolitionist may see this as a misguided attempt to keep gender indicators on driver’s licenses and identification cards, when they should be dispensed with altogether.

While the practical import of the abolitionist/revisionist debate is clear, the theoretical crux of the disagreement remains somewhat obscure. Our essentialist framework can help clarify what’s at issue: While the abolitionist and revisionist agree that a given kind *K* has some morally or politically problematic features, they disagree over whether these features are essential or merely accidental to the kind. The abolitionist contends that the features are essential and so the kind or its instances must be abolished, whereas the revisionist contends that the features are merely accidental and so the kind or its instances must be revised but not abolished. Thus, Haslanger contends that the very essence of womanhood is morally and politically problematic and so women must be abolished, whereas Mikkola contends that only certain accidental features

⁵⁰ Note that Haslanger is only an abolitionist about existing genders. She is not an abolitionist about all possible genders, as she is open to alternative non-hierarchical genders. See Haslanger (2000: §7).

of womanhood are morally or politically problematic and so womanhood should be revised but not abolished.

The essentialist framework is also practically conducive to the project of social change because it can help both abolitionists and revisionists achieve their respective aims. Once the abolitionist has identified some of the problematic essential features of the given kind, she will know how to get rid of the kind or its instances—namely, by changing social circumstances so that some of these essential features are no longer instantiated. And once the revisionist has identified the problematic accidental features of the given kind, she will know how to revise the kind or its instances—namely, by changing social circumstances so that these accidental features are no longer instantiated.

A ground-theoretic framework is less helpful for the abolitionist because a given kind can be grounded in different ways across different times and possible worlds. So, having identified the actual present grounds of the given kind, the abolitionist will still not know how to get rid of the kind or its instances—for there is no guarantee that in changing social circumstances so that the actual present grounds no longer obtain, she will not inadvertently bring about some other social circumstances which serve as alternative grounds. The abolitionist could forestall this possibility by identifying all possible grounds of the given kind, but this could turn out to be quite an undertaking. In contrast, identifying some actual present essential features of the given kind is enough for abolitionist aims, since the essence of an item is fixed across times and worlds.

Still, a ground-theoretic framework may be more helpful for certain other purposes, such as Haslanger's 'reconstructive project' of creating new egalitarian gender kinds (2000: §7).⁵¹ For this project, it is useful to articulate some possible full grounds for the new kinds, since any full ground metaphysically necessitates that which is grounded. This suggests that the apparent dichotomy between a grounding framework and an essentialist framework for social theorizing is a false one—depending on the particular purpose at hand, one or the other framework may prove to be more useful. In this paper, I have sought to highlight the virtues of an essentialist framework, as the virtues of a grounding framework have already been trumpeted in the social metaphysics literature.⁵² But what our discussion reveals is that social theorists may do well to embrace both an essentialist framework and a grounding framework. Both frameworks have their proper place in social theory.

⁵¹ Thank you to [reference omitted] for helpful discussion of this point.

⁵² See Epstein (2015, 2016), Schaffer (2017, 2019), and Griffith (2018a, 2018b).

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