

# Social Kinds Are Essentially Mind-Dependent

## 1. Introduction

Social kinds like money, women, and permanent resident are not metaphysically fundamental. They depend on something for their existence.<sup>1</sup> Intuitively, these kinds are depend on our mental states—there would be no such thing as money, migrants, or marriage in a world without any mental states.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I defend a novel view of how social kinds depend on our mental states. In particular, I argue that social kinds depend on our mental states in the following sense: it is essential to them that they exist (partially) because certain mental states exist. This analysis is meant to capture the very general way in which all social kinds depend on our mental states. However, my view is that particular social kinds also depend on our mental states in more specific ways—some of them causal, some of them metaphysical.<sup>3</sup> The various and sundry ways in which social kinds depend on our mental states are unified by the essentialist relation I describe in what follows.

My essentialist analysis of mind-dependence differs from modal-existential characterizations of mind-dependence that are prominent in the literature on social kinds. Commonly, the relation that is supposed to obtain between social kinds and our mental states is characterized in modal terms: social kinds (and other social entities, e.g., social properties, objects, facts, etc.) exist only if certain mental states exist.

For example, according to John Searle, social reality differs from natural reality because the kinds that comprise social reality “depend on us for their existence,” whereas the kinds that comprise so-called natural reality do not (2006,

---

<sup>1</sup> It's worth noting that Elizabeth Barnes (2012) argues that dependence and fundamentality may come apart for ontologically emergent entities. That is, she suggests (but doesn't endorse) the thesis that ontologically emergent entities are dependent but fundamental. The analysis of mind-dependence defended in this paper is compatible with the possibility that social kinds are ontologically emergent in Barnes's sense.

<sup>2</sup> The idea that social kinds are mind-dependent is often stated contrastively: social kinds, in contrast with so-called natural kinds (e.g., physical, chemical, and biological kinds), depend on our mental states. This is what Francesco Guala calls the “difference thesis” (Guala 2014).

<sup>3</sup> I do not defend any particular analysis of these relations, e.g., grounding. My view is that there is a plurality of more specific ways in which social kinds depend on our mental states (see Wilson 2014).

13).<sup>4</sup> In particular, he argues that social kinds are “self-referential”: their existence requires our having certain attitudes about the kinds those attitudes represent (1995, 2010). On his view, social reality “can only exist insofar as it is represented as existing” (Searle 2006, 19). That is, a social kind, K, exists only if we have certain attitudes *about* K.

Although Amie Thomasson denies that all social kinds are self-referential in this way (2003a, 275–275),<sup>5</sup> she endorses a view akin to Searle’s for *some* social kinds.<sup>6</sup> For example, on her view, money is such that it “can exist only if the relevant society collectively accepts certain principles about what ‘counts as’ money” (2003b, 386). Thus, like Searle, Thomasson characterizes mind-dependence in modal-existential terms.

Muhammed Ali Khalidi describes three ways in which social kinds depend on our mental states (2015). In each case, Khalidi characterizes the dependence relation that holds between social kinds and our mental states in modal-existential terms: the relevant social kind exists only if we have certain mental states. According to Khalidi, the difference between the three kinds of social kinds he describes is the *content* of the mental states on which they depend, not the *nature* of the dependence relation in question.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, I draw on influential work by Kit Fine (1995) to argue that modal-existential relations cannot explain how social kinds depend on our mental states.<sup>8</sup> My alternative, essentialist analysis of mind-dependence promises to

---

<sup>4</sup> Searle sometimes describes social reality as being “observer relative” or “ontologically subjective” (see e.g., 1995, 2006, 2010, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Thomasson argues that many social kinds (e.g., racism, recessions) are “conceptually opaque” (2003a, 275)—that is, they can exist even if we do not have any attitudes about them.

<sup>6</sup> Thomasson extends Searle’s view to include abstract social entities which are created by collective acceptance (e.g., corporations, laws) (2003a).

<sup>7</sup> According to Khalidi, some social kinds are such that they exist only if we have certain mental states about the kinds in question (e.g., money, war); other social kinds are such that they exist only if we have certain mental states about the kinds and their instances (e.g., permanent resident); still others are such that they exist only if we have certain mental states, but the requisite mental states need not be about the relevant kinds or their instances (e.g., racism, recessions) (2015, 99–102).

<sup>8</sup> Of course, my analysis of mind-dependence has modal implications. However, there is an important difference between defending a view of mind-dependence that has modal implications and defending a modal view of mind-dependence. I return to this point in section 3, below.

vindicate the intuition that social kinds are mind-dependent by giving an alternative account of the dependence relation in question.

Although hyperintensional analyses of dependence have gained popularity in metaphysics more generally, these accounts have not received much attention within social metaphysics in particular.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it is commonly thought that social kinds don't have essences. According to Ásta (2018), "most contemporary theorists of social kinds are skeptical of the existence of social kinds with an essence" (291).<sup>10</sup> Thus, essentialist analyses of dependence cannot simply be imported to social metaphysics without argument.<sup>11</sup> By providing such an argument, this paper opens up a promising new direction for research on the metaphysics of social kinds.

My argument will proceed as follows. In section 2, I argue that mind-dependence should not be understood in purely modal-existential terms. In section 3, I develop my essentialist analysis of mind-dependence. In section 4, I argue that social kinds have essential properties—an interesting claim in its own right. I defend a minimal but metaphysically important notion of real essence—one according to which the real essence of a kind constitutes its identity. I argue that this minimal notion of real essence is all that is needed for my essentialist analysis of mind-dependence.

## 2. Against Modal-Existential Analyses of Mind-Dependence

It is uncontroversial that there would be no social kinds in a world without any mental states. Thus, one might think that it is obvious that social kinds depend on our mental states in the following minimal sense:

(MD1) A kind, *K*, is mind-dependent =<sub>df</sub> An entity, *x*, is *K* only if certain mental states exist.

Although MD1 promises to capture the intuition that social kinds are mind-dependent, there are well-known problems with modal-existential

---

<sup>9</sup> Griffith (forthcoming, 2018a, 2018b) and Schaffer (2017) are recent exceptions. Griffiths and Schaffer employ a grounding framework rather than one that appeals to essence.

<sup>10</sup> Though this sentiment is widespread, it is rarely expressed explicitly in print.

<sup>11</sup> The anti-essentialist tendency in feminist philosophy is so strong that, as Charlotte Witt puts it, "showing that a position is 'essentialist' can function in and of itself as a good reason for rejecting it" (1995, 321).

characterizations of dependence more generally, and so with modal-existential characterizations of mind-dependence in particular (Fine 1995). These problems demonstrate that MD1 cannot account for the way in which social kinds depend on our mental states. Indeed, they demonstrate that any modal-existential analysis of mind-dependence is bound to fail.

The case against modal-existential analyses of mind-dependence is straightforward: two entities can be modally correlated without one being dependent on the other. For example, on the assumption that numbers exist necessarily, women exist only if the number two exists. But it is not the case that the existence of women depends on the number two (or vice versa). Similarly, some particular dollar bill, *d*, exists only if the set having *d* as its sole member does. But the existence of *d* does not depend on the set which contains *d* alone—to the contrary, the existence of the set depends on the existence of the dollar bill (Fine 1995).

In general, concluding that X depends on Y because X exists only if Y exists is an invalid inference. In the case of social kinds, inferring a social kind, K, depends on our mental states because K exist only if certain mental states exist is likewise invalid. This point provides a general argument against any modal-existential analysis of mind-dependence, including those endorsed by Searle, Thomasson, Khalidi and others. Modal-existential relations are simply too coarse-grained to be dependence relations. Thus, the fact that social kinds exist only if certain mental states exist does not show that social kinds depend on those mental states.

The same line of argument can be used to criticize a prominent view in the social ontology literature: the collective acceptance view. Proponents of the collective acceptance view argue social kinds are mind-dependent in the sense that they exist only if we have certain collective mental states about the kinds in question. For example, Searle argues that “something can be money, a football game, a piece of private property, a marriage or a government only insofar as it is represented as such” (Searle 2006, 19).

Similarly, Thomasson argues that social kinds such as money “depend on human representations in quite specific ways, namely on the collective acceptance of certain principles that describe sufficient conditions for the existence of Ks” (Thomasson 2003a, 588). Drawing on the influential work of John Searle (1995, 2010), she argues that social kinds depend on our mental states as follows:

(MD2) A kind, *K*, is mind-dependent =<sub>df</sub> An entity, *x*, is *K* only if we collectively accept that some conditions, *c*<sub>1</sub>...*c*<sub>*n*</sub>, suffice for being *K*.<sup>12</sup>

For example, proponents of MD2 argue that something is money only if we collectively accept that some conditions (e.g., being a bill issued by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing) suffice for being money.<sup>13</sup>

However, MD2 does no better than MD1, for it likewise rests on an invalid inference. Though MD2 differs from MD1 in detail, it simply states another relation of modal correlation. In particular, it says that social kinds are modally correlated with collective acceptance: in every possible world in which something is *K*, we collectively accept that some conditions, *c*<sub>1</sub>...*c*<sub>*n*</sub>, are sufficient for being *K*. But, as before, modal correlation is insufficient for dependence. Recall that the existence of some particular dollar bill, *d*, is modally correlated with the existence of the set which contains *d* as its sole member. Nonetheless, the former does not depend on the latter. Similarly, the existence of certain social kinds may be modally correlated with our having certain mental states, e.g., collective acceptance, but this does not demonstrate that they depend on those mental states.

This is the central problem with any version of the view that the relation that obtains between social kinds and our mental states is modal-existential in nature. Tinkering with the details of the proposed relation does nothing to address this general problem. The nature and content of the relevant mental states does not make a difference. That is, it does not matter whether the relevant mental states are acceptances, beliefs or something else. It does not matter whether the relevant mental states are collective or individualistic. It does not matter whether the relevant mental states are about the kinds, their instances, both, or neither. Although modal correlation is (defeasible) evidence of the presence of a dependence relation, it does not constitute such a relation. It is possible that something is *F* only if *Y* exists, but being *F* does not depend on *Y*. It is precisely this point which

---

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to NAME for helping me to refine MD2. See Searle 1995, 2010; Tuomela, 2007; Thomasson, 2003a and 2003b for versions of this view.

<sup>13</sup> Francesco Guala (2010, 2014) also argues against MD2. However, his argument is different from the one I offer here. Whereas I argue that MD2 is not a dependence relation, Guala argues that there are cases in which an entity is *K* but we do not collectively accept that some conditions are sufficient for being *K*.

motivates various non-modal analyses of ontological dependence, including much of the recent work on metaphysical grounding.<sup>14</sup>

The take away of this section is this: if we want an account of how social kinds depend on our mental states, we need to consider a more fine-grained relation of mind-dependence—one that goes beyond mere modal correlation. In the next section, I defend an alternative to modal-existential analyses of mind-dependence. The relation I propose avoids the objections to which modal-existential relations are subject and explains why those relations are intuitively appealing. My novel analysis of mind-dependence is part of a more general trend in metaphysics away from purely modal characterizations of ontological dependence in favor of hyperintensional ones.

### 3. Essential Mind-Dependence

In section 2, I argued that the modal-existential view of mind-dependence should be rejected. Not only does it rely on an invalid inference—that social kinds are mind-dependent because they exist only if certain mental states exist—it also neglects an intuitive and widely-accepted connection between an entity's essence and how that entity exists.<sup>15</sup> In general, if  $y$  belongs to the essence of  $x$ , then  $x$  depends on  $y$ .<sup>16</sup> For example, consider the singleton set whose sole member is some particular dollar bill,  $d$ . The set essentially has  $d$  as a member; as such, the existence of the set depends on the existence of  $d$  (by contrast, the set is no part of the essence of  $d$ , and  $d$  does not depend on the set containing  $d$  as its sole member).

My view is that it is the connection between our mental states and the essential properties of social kinds that drives the intuition that social kinds (as opposed to biological, chemical, and physical kinds) are mind-dependent in the first place. That is, it is not the case that social kinds are mind-dependent simply because they are modally correlated with our mental states. And it is not the case that manifest natural kinds fail to be mind-dependent simply because they are not modally correlated with our mental states. Consider: Even if natural kinds were

---

<sup>14</sup> For example, Fine 1995, 1994; Koslicki 2012, 2013; Tahko and Lowe 2016 defend non-modal analyses of ontological dependence. See Bliss and Trogon 2016 for an overview of recent work on grounding.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see Correia 2013; Correia and Skiles, 2017; Fine 1994, 1995, 2015, 2016; Koslicki 2012; Wang ms.

<sup>16</sup> This is what Wang ms., calls the "Essence-Dependence Link."

modally correlated with our mental states we would not be inclined to say that physical, chemical, and biological kinds are mind-dependent.<sup>17</sup> Rather, I think that we judge that social kinds are mind-dependent because there is a connection between their natures and our mental states. By contrast, we are inclined to deny that biological, chemical and physical kinds are mind-dependent because there is no connection between their natures and our mental states. For example, the nature of water has nothing to do with what we believe or intend, thus there is no reason to think that it is mind dependent.

These considerations motivate the following essentialist analysis of mind-dependence:

(EMD1) A kind, K, is mind-dependent =<sub>df</sub> It is essential to being K that an entity, x, is K only if some mental states exist.<sup>18</sup>

EMD1 does not merely say that social kinds are modally correlated with our mental states. It says that the very nature of those kinds is such that they cannot exist in the absence of some mental states. However, like the modal-existential relations considered in the previous section, we should not accept EMD1 as an analysis of the dependence relation that obtains between social kinds and our mental states. Here's why.

Recall that the source of the problem with MD1 and MD2 is that they identify dependence with some form of modal co-variation. They say that social kinds exist only if certain mental states exist. In the previous section, I argued that the fact that X and Y modally co-vary does not establish that X depends on Y, or vice versa. The addition of the essentiality operator in EMD1 does not alter the fact that modal co-variation is insufficient for dependence. That is, the essentiality operator in EMD1 does not change the fact that we cannot validly infer that social kinds are mind-dependent from the fact that it is essential to them that they exist only if certain mental states exist. If the fact that X exists only if Y exists does not establish that X depends on Y, then the fact that it is essential to X that X exists only if Y exists does not establish that X depends on Y. All that it establishes is that X and Y are essentially modally correlated; but, as before, modal correlation is insufficient for

---

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee who urged me to say more on this point.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to NAME for helping me to refine this definition.

dependence. Thus, EMD1 is too coarse-grained to account for the way in which social kinds depend on our mental states.<sup>19</sup>

For this reason, I propose to define an essentialist relation of mind-dependence that does not appeal modal notions:

(EMD2) A kind, K, is mind-dependent =<sub>df</sub> It is essential to being K that if an entity, x, is K, then x is K (partially) because certain mental states exist.<sup>20</sup>

Not only does EMD2 avoid objections faced by modal-existential characterizations of mind-dependence, even essentialist ones, it explains their initial appeal: social kinds exist only if certain mental states exist precisely because it is essential to them that if some instances of those kinds exist, then they exist (partially) because certain mental states exist. Thus, although EMD2 is not a modal relation, it has clear modal implications. In particular, EMD2 entails that social kinds are modally correlated with our mental states. However, there is an important difference between defending a view of mind-dependence that has modal implications and defending a modal view of mind-dependence.

At this point, some additional clarifications are in order. First, EMD2 says that social kinds are essentially such that they exist (partially) because certain mental states exist. The parenthetical qualification is included because many social kinds depend on more than just certain mental states. For instance, the existence of money depends on the existence of certain mental states, but it also depends on certain behavior, the social structures and institutions that produce and reproduce the relevant behavior, as well as aspects of our physical environments. In other words, social kinds are mind-dependent, but they do not exclusively depend on our having certain mental states. Often, they depend on many other things as well—a point that much of the literature on social kinds fails to acknowledge.<sup>21</sup>

Second, EMD2 is neutral with respect to whether “because” is understood causally or metaphysically. This is because EMD2 is meant to capture the very general way in which all social kinds depend on our mental states. However, my view is that particular social kinds also depend on our mental states in more specific

---

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to NAME for this objection, and to NAME for subsequent discussion.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to NAME and NAME for helping me to refine this definition.

<sup>21</sup> The work of Brian Epstein and Sally Haslanger are notable exceptions. Thanks to NAME for helpful discussion on this point.

ways—some of them causal, some of them metaphysical. In particular, some social kinds are such that intentional behavior *causes* the instantiation of their essential properties. By contrast, other social kinds are such that our having certain mental states *non-causally make it the case* that their essential properties are instantiated.

Consider money. The essential properties of money are the properties of being a commonly-used medium of exchange and being a measure and store of value. In virtue of what are these properties instantiated? Objects acquire the essential properties of money when they are widely-used to purchase goods and services, and to repay debts. That is, intentional behavior causes some entities (e.g., cowry shells, gold coins, bits of paper) to exemplify the essential properties of money. Thus, money is *causally* mind-dependent. Our having certain mental states causes us to behave in ways that cause objects to have the properties of being a commonly-used medium of exchange and being a measure and store of value.

A wide variety of social kinds depend on our mental states in this way. For example, according to Sally Haslanger, what it is to be a woman is to be systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) because of one's observed or imagined bodily features (Haslanger 2000). Moreover, an individual, S, has this property because of how she is treated (e.g., she is paid less than equally-well-qualified men, her testimony is not taken seriously, she is subject to domestic abuse and sexual violence, she is sexually harassed and sanctioned for failing to behave submissively toward men, etc.). Thus, intentional behavior causes S to instantiate the property being subordinate to men. As such, on Haslanger's view, gender is causally mind-dependent.

By contrast, consider the kind permanent resident. What it is to be a permanent resident is to be authorized to live and work in a country, C, indefinitely without being a citizen of C. For example, I am a permanent resident of the United States. That is, I have the property of being authorized to live and work in the United States indefinitely, without being a U.S. citizen. Unlike money, our intentional behavior does not cause individuals to be permanent residents. Rather, I am a permanent resident of the United States by agreement or decree. As soon as the relevant individual(s) declared that I am a permanent resident of the United States, I acquired the property of being authorized to live and work in the United

States indefinitely, without being a U.S. citizen.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it is the fact that I acquired this property simultaneously with the declaration that I am permanent resident which indicates that the relation that obtains between our mental states and someone's being a permanent resident is not a causal one. This is because causal relations are diachronic, not synchronic. Thus, being a permanent resident stands in a non-causal metaphysical relation to our mental states: it is *ontologically* mind-dependent. Other social kinds that plausibly depend on our mental states in this way include citizen, marriage, and popularity.

Third, it is important to note that EMD2 is intended to provide an analysis of how social kinds depend on our mental states, but it is not intended to provide an analysis of what it is to be a social kind. Although all social kinds are essentially mind-dependent, it is not the case that social kinds just are those kinds that depend on our mental states as defined by EMD2. To the contrary, many non-social kinds depend on our mental states in the same way. For example, it is essential to being in pain that if *x* is in pain, then *x* is in pain (partially) because certain mental states exist. Thus, being in pain is essentially mind-dependent; however, pain is not a social kind.

In fact, I think it is next to impossible to give a non-circular account of what makes a kind social (Haslanger 2012, 197; Epstein 2015, 102). Rather, I think that we ought to take being social as a primitive. In my view, the best we can do is to begin by investigating paradigmatically social kinds. With respect to kinds that are not paradigmatically social, we may proceed by comparing them to the paradigmatically

---

<sup>22</sup> My immigration lawyer emphasized that this was the case after my interview at U.S.C.I.S. Following Ásta, I'll call properties such as the property of being authorized to live and work in C permanently, without being a citizen of C, conferred properties (Ásta 2008, 2013, 2018). A conferred property is a property that is instantiated in virtue of subjects' attitudes towards the entity or entities that instantiate it. For example, my pen instantiates the property of being the pen I intend to write with just by my forming the intention to write with it. Likewise, my T-shirt instantiates the property of being my favorite T-shirt just because I like it more than any other T-shirt. If the essential properties of a kind, *K*, include conferred properties, then *K* is a conferred property kind. I think that many social kinds are conferred property kinds, including marriage and citizenship. Ásta argues that all social categories are conferred property kinds, including being female, being a woman, being straight, being white, or being "the wrong kind of brown" (Ásta 2018). However, I doubt that conferred property kinds are quite so pervasive. For example, it is unlikely that abstract social kinds like laws and corporations can be accounted for within Ásta's conferralist framework. This is because there is no object on which the property of being a law or being a corporation gets conferred; rather, when laws and corporations are created, entirely new objects come into existence. See Thomasson 2003a for a similar critique of Searle's view. Ásta's conferralist view works best for social categories that have people as members.

social ones. Another strategy is to deploy diagnostics derived from an intuitive understanding of what it is to be social. For example, if all social kinds are essentially mind-dependent, discovering that some kind depends on our mental states in that way is at least some evidence that the kind in question is social. However, because many essentially mind-dependent kinds are not social kinds, we still need some other way of identifying which ones are social.<sup>23</sup>

Fourth, I said that EMD2 does not employ any modal notions; in particular, my defense of EMD2 does not employ a modal conception of essence. According to modal conceptions of essence, any property, *F*, that is necessary to being *K*, is essential to being *K*. However, identifying essential properties with modal properties generates some counterintuitive results (Fine 1994). For example, according to the modal conception of essence, being such that  $2+2=4$  is necessary to being water because a substance is water only if  $2+2=4$ . Therefore, being such that  $2+2=4$  is essential to being water. Similarly, being such that some particular dollar bill, *d*, is self-identical is essential to being water because something is water only if *d* is identical to *d*. Intuitively, however, these properties are not part of the essence of being water. The nature of water has nothing to do with mathematics or American money.

Instead, I espouse a non-modal conception of essence according to which the essential properties of an entity, *X*, have to do with *X*'s identity—they are the properties that make *X* the very entity that *X* is (Fine 1994).<sup>24</sup> In other words, the essence of *X* is what *X* is, or what it is to be *X*. Essential properties come in two varieties: individual and general. The essential properties of an individual are what it is to be that very individual, as opposed to some other individual. For example, the real essence of Queen Elizabeth II (say, her biological origin) is what it is to be Queen Elizabeth II, as opposed to Queen Elizabeth I, or Marie Antoinette.

Additionally, individuals belong to kinds. If *X* is something of kind, *K*, then *X*'s general or generic essence is what it is to be of kind, *K*, as opposed to some other

---

<sup>23</sup> Here is one way of doing so: could the kind in question be instantiated in a world with only one person? If so, then the kind in question is not a social kind. I call this the "Robinson Crusoe Test."

<sup>24</sup> It is not the case that the essence of *X* is always definable in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. First, some kinds have primitive essences; in that case, no analysis of the kind's essence is possible (Rosen 2015). Second, some kinds may have homeostatic property cluster essences. Homeostatic property clusters are families of properties that are contingently but reliably co-instantiated because they are held in homeostasis by one or more causal mechanisms (see Boyd 1999; Rubin 2008; Mallon 2003, 2016).

kind,  $K^*$ . For example, take some particular dollar bill,  $d$ , which belongs to the kind money. The essential properties of  $d$  are those properties that make that bill the very object that it is, as opposed to some other bill,  $d^*$ . But  $d$  also belongs to the kind money. The kind money has a general essence. The general essence of that kind identifies what it is to be of the kind money, as opposed to some other kind (say, tigers or refugees), and those properties in virtue of which  $d$  is money. EMD2 concerns the general essences of social kinds. It says that it is part of the identity of social kinds (e.g., it is part of the identity of the kind money) that if anything of that kind exists, then it exists as a member of that kind (partly) because certain mental states exist.

In this section, I have argued that social kinds are essentially mind dependent. On my view, social kinds are such that it is essential to them that if there are any instances of those kinds, those instances exist (partially) because certain mental states exist. Clearly, EMD2 presupposes that social kinds have general essences. However, some philosophers are skeptical that this is the case. In the next section, I defend the claim that social kinds have general essences against two objections.

#### 4. In Defense of Social Kind Essentialism

The essentialist view of mind-dependence laid out in the previous section presupposes that social kinds have essential properties. However, many philosophers find essentialism about social kinds implausible (Ásta 2018, 291). In this section I consider what strike me as the best objections to social kind essentialism. I show that these objections do not demonstrate that social kinds lack essential properties.

First, one might think that social kinds lack general essences because social kinds, unlike physical, chemical, and biological kinds, are merely unified by the descriptive criteria which are associated with the words and/or concepts we use to refer to them.<sup>25</sup> This anti-essentialist view is most explicitly articulated in the feminist philosophy literature on the metaphysics of gender (e.g., DeLaurentis 1994, Fuss 1989, Grosz 1994, Heyes 2000, Spelman 1995, Stoljar 1995, Witt 1995), but it can also be found elsewhere in the social metaphysics literature (e.g., Thomasson 2003b).

---

<sup>25</sup> Thanks to NAME for raising this objection.

Among feminist philosophers, this view is sometimes developed by appeal to the notion of a nominal essence (de Lauretis 1994, Fuss 1989).<sup>26</sup> Nominal essences are ideas which we associate with words. These ideas can be thought of as descriptively individuated concepts. For example, the nominal essence associated with the word “water” is the idea of an odorless, colorless liquid that fills rivers and lakes and falls from the sky when it rains, etc. Nominal essences contrast with real essences. The latter are not conceptual entities; rather, they are worldly in the sense that they are constituted by properties, individuals, and relations. The real essence of a kind, K, specifies the nature of K.

The anti-essentialist proposal under consideration here is that unity among social kinds is conceptual rather than metaphysical. Social kind terms are associated with nominal essences which enable us to refer to social kinds, without its being the case that social kinds have real essences that metaphysically unify kind members independently of the ideas we associate with social kind terms.

This anti-essentialist view is unsustainable. I will argue that it is false that social kinds have nominal essences but not real essences. First premise: everything that exists has an identity. This is a metaphysical truism.<sup>27</sup> Second premise: the properties that identify a kind, K, constitute K’s real essence.<sup>28</sup> This is simply a re-statement of the non-modal conception of essence discussed above. Third premise: many social kinds exist. The anti-essentialist feminists mentioned above are not

---

<sup>26</sup> See Witt 2011b for discussion. Although the real/nominal essence distinction has its origin in Locke, the view described in what follows is not his.

<sup>27</sup> An anonymous reviewer argues that metaphysical vagueness poses a problem for the claim that everything that exists has an identity. However, metaphysical vagueness poses no problem for the sense of identity at issue in premise one. Consider Tibbles the cat. Suppose that Tibbles is a vague object: there is no fact of the matter whether Tibbles is identical with some collection of molecules, m. This does not entail that Tibbles lacks an identity in the relevant sense. Suppose that origin essentialism is true—that is, suppose that Tibbles’s origin is essential to her. In that case, the property of originating from, say, Fluffy the cat and Whiskers the cat, is essential to Tibbles. This property constitutes Tibbles’s identity. That is, it is the property that makes Tibbles the very cat that she is, as opposed to some other cat.

<sup>28</sup> An anonymous reviewer points out that feminists may reject this premise: social kinds are not individuated by their essential properties. However, feminists must—on pain of incoherence—admit that social kinds are individuated by some properties or other. For, per premise one, everything that exists has an identity, and, per premise three, many social kinds exist. According to the view of essence that I espouse, whatever properties individuate a kind are the essential properties of the kind in question. Perhaps feminists do not wish to call these properties “essential properties.” However, this is not a substantive metaphysical disagreement; it is a terminological one. As such, it does not demonstrate that the argument is unsound.

eliminativists about social kinds. That is, they do not deny that social kinds like marriage and gender exist; rather, they argue that social kinds exist but do not have real essences. Conclusion: those kinds have real essences. In other words, if a social kind, K, exists, then K has an identity—that is, there are some properties that specify what it is to be K. These properties constitute the real essence of K. Therefore, it is not the case that social kinds lack real essences.<sup>29</sup>

Another reason why one might deny that social kinds have real essences is because real essences are supposed to demarcate natural kinds (in some sense of the word “natural”), and social kinds are not natural kinds in the relevant sense. In other words, only natural kinds have real essences and social kinds are not natural kinds.<sup>30</sup> However, I see no good reason to impose this restriction on real essences. Insofar as real essences identify kinds, and every kind that exists has an identity, every kind that exists has a real essence, whether or not the kind in question is natural.

A closely related objection is that the real essence of a kind is causally responsible for other properties that kind members instantiate. For example, being H<sub>2</sub>O is essential to water; that property causes instances of water to have a collection of other properties, such as the property of boiling at 100 degrees Celsius, freezing at zero degrees Celsius, and conducting electricity. However, one might worry that social kinds do not have properties that are causally responsible for the other properties that kind members happen to share. I find this suggestion highly dubious, but I won't dwell on it here (see Khalidi 2013 and 2015 for discussion). This is because I see no reason to impose a causal requirement on real essences. That is, essential properties of a kind need not be causally responsible for other properties kind members instantiate. On my view, the real essence of a kind, K, specifies what it is to be K. That is, real essences individuate kinds. This is the case whether or not

---

<sup>29</sup> One might try to resist this conclusion by arguing that the individuals classified by the nominal essence associated with a social kind term do not belong to a *kind* in the first place; rather, they belong to a *set* or a *class*. This proposal fails for two reasons. First, both kinds and sets have identities. Therefore, both kinds and sets have real essences. Second, social kind terms do not plausibly refer to sets or classes. This is because sets and classes are extensionally individuated, whereas, on the present proposal, the plurality of individuals classified by the nominal essence associated with a kind term are not extensionally individuated. Rather, they are individuated intensionally, by the criteria which comprise the nominal essence associated with the kind term used to classify them.

<sup>30</sup> Thanks to NAME for raising this objection.

the essential properties of K are causally responsible for other properties kind members instantiate.<sup>31</sup>

At this point, it is worth distinguishing two views that are often endorsed together: essentialism and what I will call “metaontological realism.” Essentialism—in particular, generic essentialism or essentialism about kinds—is the view that kinds have essential properties. These properties are what make the kind the very kind that it is, as opposed to some other kind. Every kind that exists has an essence in this sense because every kind that exists has an identity. By contrast, metaontological realism is the view that of all the kinds that there are, some of them are “objectively privileged,” “elite,” or “perfectly natural” (Lewis 1983). Importantly, these kinds are supposed to have their special metaphysical status independently of our thinking about them. They are special come what may and are not just special given our peculiar epistemic and practical interests. Many philosophers are skeptical that social kinds have this special status, which is usually reserved for fundamental physical kinds. Indeed, some philosophers (including this one) are skeptical that any kinds have this special status (Dasgupta 2018).

But even if one denies that social kinds are objectively privileged (even if one denies that *any* kinds are objectively privileged), this does not entail that social kinds do not have real essences. Though essentialism is sometimes combined with metaontological realism, these views are independent of one another. One need not think that some kinds are objectively privileged to think that kinds have real essences; and thinking that kinds have real essences does not entail that those kinds are objectively privileged.

Moreover, we have good reason to distinguish essentialism and metaontological realism. This is because metaphysics needs a minimal notion of essence, one according to which the real essence of a kind constitutes its identity. The minimal notion is metaphysically important because unless a kind has an identity, there is nothing to make that kind the very kind that it is, as opposed to any other kind, and metaphysicians need to identify and distinguish kinds even if those kinds are not natural or metaphysically privileged (Lowe 2008, 36–37). Although this

---

<sup>31</sup> Thanks to NAME for raising this objection.

minimal notion of real essence can be augmented in various ways, it is independent of more heavy-weight essentialist views.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, this minimal notion of essence is all that is needed for EMD2. According to EMD2, it is essential to a social kind, K, if x is K, then x is K (partially) because some mental states exist. In other words, given the identity of the kind, K, if something is K, then it is K (partly) because some mental states exist. On my view, the essential properties of a social kind, K, are simply those properties that identify K—that is, those properties that make K the kind that it is, as opposed to some other kind. The kind in question need not be natural in any sense; all it needs is an identity. Happily, every kind that exists has an identity, including social kinds.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that all social kinds are essentially mind-dependent. According to my novel analysis of mind-dependence, social kinds are such that it is essential to them that if there are any instances of those kinds, those instances exist (partially) because certain mental states exist. Although all social kinds are essentially mind-dependent, my view is that particular social kinds also depend on our mental states in more specific ways: some social kinds are causally mind-dependent, whereas others are ontologically mind-dependent.

Not only does my essentialist analysis of mind-dependence capture the close connection between the nature of a kind and how that kind exists, it avoids the objections raised against modal-existential analyses of mind-dependence, and ontological dependence more generally. Thus, the account of mind-dependence defended in this paper is part of the post-modal trend in metaphysics away from intensional relations like supervenience in favor of hyperintensional relations like grounding.<sup>33</sup>

Next, I argued that social kinds have essential properties—an interesting claim in its own right. I defended a minimal but metaphysically important notion of real essence—one that takes as primary that the real essence of a kind constitutes its identity. On this view, the essential properties of a kind, K, are those properties which characterize the identity of K—that is, K's nature or what it is to be K.

---

<sup>32</sup> Although they do not say so, I suspect that many feminists who deny that social kinds have real essences have a more heavy-weight notion of real essence in mind.

<sup>33</sup> Though Kovacs, *forthcoming* argues that *proper* supervenience is hyperintensional.

Because every kind that exists has an identity, every kind that exists has an essence in this sense—including social kinds. Moreover, I argued that this minimal notion of real essence is all that is needed for EMD2.

## Bibliography

- Ásta. *Categories We Live By*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- . "Social Kinds." *The Routledge Handbook of Collective Intentionality*, edited by Marija Janovic and Kirk Ludwig, Routledge, 2018, pp. 290–99.
- . "The Social Construction of Human Kinds." *Hypatia* 28.4 (2013): 716–732.
- . "The Metaphysics of Sex and Gender." *Feminist Metaphysics*. Ed. Charlotte Witt. Springer, 2011.
- . "Essentiality Conferred." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 1 (2008): 135–148.
- Barnes, Elizabeth. "Emergence and Fundamentality." *Mind* 121, no. 484 (2012): 873–901.
- Bliss, Ricki and Trogon, Kelly, "Metaphysical Grounding", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/grounding/>>.
- Boyd, Richard. "Homeostasis, Species, and Higher Taxa." In *Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, edited by R.A. Wilson, 141–85. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.
- Correia, F. (2013). *Metaphysical Grounds and Essence*. In M. Hoeltje, B. Schnieder, & A. Steinberg (Eds.), *Varieties of Dependence: Ontological Dependence, Grounding, Supervenience, Response-Dependence* (pp. 271–296). München: Philosophia.
- Correia, F., & Skiles, A. (forthcoming). *Grounding, Essence, and Identity*. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- Dasgupta, Shamik. 2018. "Realism and the Absence of Value." *Philosophical Review* 127 (3): 279–322.

- DeLauretis, Teresa. "The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously." *The Essential Difference*, edited by Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 1–39.
- Epstein, B. "A Framework for Social Ontology." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 46.2 (2016): 147–167.
- . "How Many Kinds of Glue Hold the Social World Together?" *Perspectives on Social Ontology and Social Cognition*. Ed. Mattia Gallotti and John Michael. Springer Netherlands, 2014a. 41–55.
- . "Ontological Individualism Reconsidered." *Synthese* 1 (2009): 187–213.
- . "Social Objects without Intentions." *Institutions, Emotions, and Group Agents: Contributions to Social Ontology*. Ed. Konzelmann Ziv, Anita and Bernhard Schmid, Hans. Springer, 2013. 53–68.
- . *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- . "What Is Individualism in Social Ontology? Ontological Individualism vs. Anchor Individualism." *Rethinking the Individualism–Holism Debate*. Ed. Julie Zahle and Finn Collin. Springer International Publishing, 2014b. 17–38.
- Fine, K. (2015). "Unified Foundations for Essence and Ground." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 296–311.
- . "Ontological Dependence." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1995): 269–290.
- . 1994. "Essence and Modality." *Philosophical Perspectives* 8: 1–16.
- Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. Routledge, 1989.
- Griffith, Aaron M. "Realizing Race." *Philosophical Studies*, Forthcoming.
- . "Social Construction and Grounding." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 97, no. 2, 2018, pp. 393–409.
- . "Social Construction: Big-G Grounding, Small-g Realization." *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 175, no. 1, 2018, pp. 241–60.

- Grosz, Elizabeth. "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism." *The Essential Difference*, edited by Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 82–97.
- Guala, F. "Infallibilism and Human Kinds." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 40.2 (2010): 244–264.
- . "On the Nature of Social Kinds." *Perspectives on Social Ontology and Social Cognition*. Ed. Mattia Gallotti and John Michael. Springer Netherlands, 2014. 57–68.
- Hacking, I. "A Tradition of Natural Kinds." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 1/2 (1991): 109–126. Print.
- . "Kinds of People: Moving Targets." *Proceedings of the British Academy* 151 (2007): 285–318.
- . "Making Up People." *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*. Ed. Heller, Thomas C., Sosna, Morton, and Wellbery, David. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986. 222–236.
- . "The Looping Effects of Human Kinds." *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate*. Ed. D. Sperber, D. Premack, and A.J. Premack. New York: Clarendon Press, 1995. 351–383.
- Haslanger, S. "A Social Constructionist Analysis of Race." *Revisiting Race in a Genomic Age*. Ed. Koenig, Barbara A., Soo-Jin Lee, Sandra, and Richardson, Sarah. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008. 56–69.
- . "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" *Nous* 34.1 (2000): 31–55.
- . "Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds: What Good Are Our Intuitions?" *Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volume* Supp.80 (2006): 89–118.
- . "Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements." *Res Philosophica* 94.1 (2017): 1–22.
- . *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

- . "Social Construction: Gender and Other Social Categories." Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy. Ed. Anne Garry, Serene Khader, and Alison Stone. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- . "What Are We Talking About? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds." *Hypatia* 20.4 (2005): 10–26.
- Heyes, Cressida. *Line Drawings: Defining Women through Feminist Practice*. Cornell University Press, 2000.
- Khalidi, M. *Natural Categories and Human Kinds: Classification in the Natural and Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- . "Three Kinds of Social Kinds." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90.1 (2015): 96–112.
- Koslicki, Kathrin. "Ontological Dependence: An Opinionated Survey." In *Varieties of Dependence: Ontological Dependence, Grounding, Supervenience, Response-Dependence*, edited by Benjamin Schnieder, Miguel Hoeltje, and Alex Steinberg, 21–64. *Philosophia Verlag*, 2013.
- . (2012). *Varieties of Ontological Dependence*. In F. Correia & B. Schnieder (Eds.), *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality* (pp. 186–305). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kovacs, David Mark. "The Myth of the Myth of Supervenience." *Philosophical Studies*, Forthcoming.
- Lowe, E. J. (2008). *Two Notions of Being: Entity and Essence*. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, 62, 23–48.
- Mallon, Ron. *The Construction of Human Kinds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- . "Social Construction, Social Roles, and Stability." In *Socializing Metaphysics: The Nature of Social Reality*, edited by Frederik Schmitt, 65–91. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
- Rosen, Gideon. "Real Definition." *Analytic Philosophy* 56, no. 3 (2015): 189–209.
- Ruben, D. "Realism in the Social Sciences." *Dismantling Truth*. Ed. Hilary Lawson and Lisa Appignanesi. *Wedenfeld and Nicholson*, 1989. 58–75.

- Rubin, Michael. "Is Goodness a Homeostatic Property Cluster?" *Ethics* 118 (2008): 496–528.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. "Social Construction as Grounding." *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 174, 2017, pp. 2449–2465.
- Searle, John. 1995. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: The Free Press.
- . 2006. "Social Ontology: Some Basic Principles." *Anthropological Theory* 6 (1): 12–29.
- . 2008. "Language and Social Ontology." *Theory and Society* 37 (5): 443–459.
- . 2010. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2014. "Are There Social Objects?" In *Perspectives on Social Ontology and Social Cognition*, edited by M Gallotti and J Michael, 17–26. *Studies in the Philosophy of Society* 4.
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Beacon Press, 1988.
- Stoljar, Natalie. "Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman." *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261–293.
- Tahko, Tuomas E. and Lowe, E. Jonathan, "Ontological Dependence", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/dependence-ontological/>>.
- Thomasson, A. "Foundation for a Social Ontology." *ProtoSociology* 18 (2003a): 269–290.
- . "Realism and Human Kinds." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2003b): 580–609.
- Tuomela, R. *The Philosophy of Sociality: The Shared Point of View*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Wang, J. "Fundamental Essences." Manuscript.
- Wilson, Jessica M. "No Work for a Theory of Grounding." *Inquiry*, vol. 57, no. 5–6, 2014, pp. 535–79.

Witt, C. "Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory." *Philosophical Topics* (1995): 321–344.

---. "What Is Gender Essentialism?" *Feminist Metaphysics*. Ed. Charlotte Witt. Springer Verlag, 2011b. 11–25.