

Re-evaluating Social Essences

4th Annual Meeting of the
[Canadian Metaphysics Collaborative](#)

April 30—May 2, 2021

HOSTED BY:

[University of Victoria](#)

It was once common to investigate the various items of the social world (institutions, nations, races, genders, artifacts, and so on) by investigating their essences or natures. But many theories of essence relied on assumptions that were scientifically unsupported, philosophically unsubstantiated, or socially unjust. Recent developments in philosophy, however, are rehabilitating essence. The guiding theme of this workshop is to reevaluate the prospects for social essences in particular.

CONFERENCE ORGANIZER:

Michael Raven (University of Victoria)

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sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Program

Friday April 30, 2021

8:45-9:00 *Greetings*

9:00-10:30 **What are Sex and Gender and What Do We Want Them to Be?**

CHAIR: **Katharine Jenkins** (University of Glasgow)

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: **Ásta** (San Francisco State University)

10:30-11:00 *Break*

11:00-12:30 **Permission to Exist: Social Classification and Identity Politics**

CHAIR: **Jennifer Wang** (Simon Fraser University)

SPEAKER: **Jude Buckner** (Duke University)

COMMENTATOR: **Elise Woodard** (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)

12:30-1:30 *Lunch*

1:30-3:00 **The Concept of Gender Identity**

CHAIR: **Michael Raven** (University of Victoria)

INAUGURAL

ALUMNI SPEAKER: **Kit Fine** (New York University)

Saturday May 1, 2021

8:45-9:00 *Greetings*

9:00-10:30 Statelessness and the Social Ontology of State Membership

CHAIR: **Michael Wallner** (University of Graz)

SPEAKER: **Heather Alexander & Jonathan Simon** (Université de Montréal)

COMMENTATOR: **Frank Hindriks** (University of Groningen)

10:30-11:00 *Break*

11:00-12:30 Women as Victims of 'Misogyny': Re-centering Marginalization

CHAIR: **Kathrin Koslicki** (Université de Neuchâtel)

SPEAKER: **Angela Zhao** (University of British Columbia)

COMMENTATOR: **Charlotte Witt** (University of New Hampshire)

12:30-1:30 *Lunch*

1:30-3:00 Social Kind Essentialism

CHAIR: **Kevin Richardson** (North Carolina State University)

SPEAKER: **Asya Passinsky** (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

COMMENTATOR: **Kate Ritchie** (University of California, Irvine)

3:00-3:30 *Break*

3:30-5:00 Real Definition and the Generation of Essence

CHAIR: **Fatema Amijee** (University of British Columbia)

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: **Brian Epstein** (Tufts University)

(all times Pacific Standard Time)

Sunday May 2, 2021

8:45-9:00 *Greetings*

9:00-10:30 **Words, Species, and Kinds**

CHAIR: **Martin Glazier** (University of Hamburg)

SPEAKER: **James Miller** (Durham University)

COMMENTATOR: **Simone Evnine** (University of Miami)

10:30-11:00 *Break*

11:00-12:30 **Social Kinds* and Social Groups**

CHAIR: **Ka Ho Lam** (Karlsruhe Institute of Technology)

SPEAKER: **Rachel K. Cooper** (University of California, Irvine)

COMMENTATOR: **Aaron Griffith** (College of William and Mary)

12:30-1:30 *Lunch*

1:30-3:00 **Social Kinds are Essentially Mind-Dependent**

CHAIR: **Michaela McSweeney** (Boston University)

SPEAKER: **Rebecca Mason** (University of San Francisco)

COMMENTATOR: **Irem Kurtsal** (Allegheny College)

3:00-3:30 *Break*

3:30-5:00 **Language and Social Ontology: From Refugees to Rideshare Drivers**

CHAIR: **Erica Shumener** (University of Pittsburgh)

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: **Muhammad Ali Khalidi** (City University of New York)

(all times Pacific Standard Time)

Abstracts

(alphabetized by title)

The Identity of Gender

Kit Fine (New York University)

1:30-3:00 Friday April 30, 2021

What is it to be a trans woman? What is it to be a woman in a sense that is inclusive of trans women? These questions raise a number of difficult conceptual issues. What is the target concept of woman to which a proposed account of the concept should be responsive? How do we avoid the vicious circularity that appears to be involved in partly defining woman in terms of taking oneself to be a woman? And how can the intended concept of woman meet the various different demands that have been placed upon it? How can it function, for example, as a means of self-identification, as a role in society, and as a basis for political action? I shall attempt to resolve these issues by offering a response dependent account of what it is to be a woman. Under this account, one way to be a woman is appropriately to take oneself to be a woman. But the circularity is harmless in a way that is characteristic of response dependent concepts; and the circularity is not merely harmless but actually beneficial in that it enables one to see womanhood as something over which one can have a choice.

Language and Social Ontology: From Refugees to Rideshare Drivers

Muhammad Ali Khalidi (City University of New York)

3:30-5:00 Sunday May 2, 2021

Some philosophers of social science consider speech acts, and linguistic communication more generally, to be essential to the ontology of the social domain. For them, social phenomena must be explicitly or implicitly represented as such in language. But many social phenomena seem not to depend on acts of linguistic communication and are not constituted or created by linguistic representations, including social kinds like *poverty*, *unemployment*, *immigration*, *racism*, *suburb*, *refugee*, *kinship*, and *art*. While thoroughly mind-dependent, such kinds are individuated primarily by their causal-functional profile rather than by certain speech acts that constitute them or bring them into being. This gives rise to a distinction between mind-dependent kinds that are also language-dependent and those that are not. Social kinds that are additionally language-dependent are typically more institutional and formalized than ones that are not. In what ways are these social kinds similar to or different from those that are not dependent on our representing them as such? Moreover, do some kinds have both a language-dependent and language-independent variety, and if so, how do they interact? For example, what is the difference between being a refugee and having refugee status, as explicitly granted by the UNHCR, and do they correspond to distinct social kinds? How do linguistic reclassifications, sometimes rooted in judicial decisions, affect the nature of some social kinds and their members? For example, does reclassifying workers in the “gig economy” as employees, rather than independent contractors, change their kind membership, or does this need to have uptake and be backed up by other actions, and if so, in what ways? In this presentation, I will try to provide some tentative answers to these questions. While affirming the distinction between social kinds that are language-dependent and those that are not, I will argue that the distinction between these kinds is not very sharp and that some social kinds can come in both versions. Even though social kinds cannot be manufactured at will merely by representing them, collective representation accompanied by certain types of collective action can be efficacious in creating and modifying social kinds.

(all times Pacific Standard Time)

Permission to Exist: Social Classification and Identity Politics

Jude Buckner (Duke University)

11:00-12:30 Friday April 30, 2021

Often, our reasons for believing that a political position is right or wrong are traceable to shared beliefs about social groups. What we think is a choice between political actions is sometimes in fact a choice between competing sets of facts describing a social group. Similarly, what we sometimes conceive of as an intellectual debate between two metaphysical positions is in fact a choice between two approaches to the shared, material life goals of relevant communities. These parallel functions of identity expression can be difficult to disentangle, with profound repercussions. I make the case for applying a specific framework of analytic social metaphysics and epistemology to normative political theory. Because of the consequences of this method, I argue for characterizing identity-related social projects in terms of material aims in order to limit the power of rhetorical abstraction to reduce human life goals to mere ideology critique.

Real Definition and the Generation of Essence

Brian Epstein (Tufts University)

3:30-5:00 Saturday May 1, 2021

How are we to understand the essences of social entities, and how are those essences generated? An adequate account of essences should align with an account of their construction or generation. In Epstein 2015, 2016, and 2019, I develop a theory of the generation or “anchoring” of social entities that treats the generation of “grounding conditions” as the central operation in social construction. Recent articles on essence, grounding, and real definition (e.g., Fine 2015, Rosen 2015, Correia and Skiles 2019), however, are developing different pictures of the relation between grounds and essence, and of how both of these figure into the nature of entities. In this paper, I explore a simple case in detail to illustrate shortcomings with prevailing approaches to real definition and to propose that essence might be understood in terms of “packages” of grounding conditions. The proposed approach is congenial to accounting for the generation of essences.

Social Essentialism

Asya Passinsky (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

1:30-3:00 Saturday May 1, 2021

There is widespread opposition to so-called essentialism in contemporary social theory. At the same time, the notion of essence has been revived and put to work in contemporary analytic metaphysics. This paper reexamines the prospects for essentialism in social theory, in light of these developments in the study of essence. I argue that neo-Aristotelian social kind essentialism avoids the main objections that social theorists have raised against other brands of social kind essentialism. I further argue that neo-Aristotelian essentialism provides a helpful framework for projects in social construction and feminist metaphysics.

Social Kinds are Essentially Mind-Dependent

Rebecca Mason (University of San Francisco)

1:30-3:00 Sunday May 2, 2021

In this paper, I defend a novel view of how social kinds (e.g., money, women, permanent residents) 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, others metaphysical. I defend a minimal but metaphysically important notion of essence—one that takes as primary that the essential properties of a kind constitute its identity—and argue that this minimal notion of essence is all that is needed to vindicate my claim that social kinds are essentially mind-dependent.

Social Kinds* and Social Groups

Rachel K. Cooper (University of California, Irvine)

11:00-12:30 Sunday May 2, 2021

In this paper, I offer proposals for reengineering two related but importantly distinct concepts: that of a social kind and that of a social group. I propose that a group is a *social group* if its members jointly accept a covertly normative representation of individuals with a certain cluster of features, and this acceptance explains some of the regularities observed among individuals with that cluster of features. I propose that a kind is a *social kind* if its members share a certain cluster of features, and if (at least some of) the regularities observed among members are explained (in part) by the joint acceptance of a covertly normative representation of the kind associated with that cluster of features. I argue that these are the best concepts to use for the purposes of combatting oppression because they facilitate an understanding of how we unwittingly contribute to the appearance of an underlying essence among members of social kinds while also making clear that, in fact, there is no underlying essence among members (whether natural or social).

Statelessness and the Social Ontology of State Membership

Heather Alexander & Jonathan Simon (Université de Montréal)

9:00-10:30 Saturday May 1, 2021

Where political nation-states are concerned, the question “who is a member?” is problematic. We propose that the question should be replaced with a trio of more nuanced ones: “who plays an anchoring role?”, “who is recognized as a national?” and “who has a (moral) right to be recognized as a national?”. We will look at the phenomenon of statelessness to illustrate the divergence of these notions. Statelessness is the condition of not being recognized as a national under the operation of any state's law (a condition in which millions of people around the world currently and themselves). We will then explore a sense in which the question of anchoring role has explanatory priority, because settling it helps us settle the other two questions. To this end we first suggest three candidate criteria for determining when some group or individual plays an anchoring role for a nation-state, and we show that on all three criteria, stateless persons generally play an anchoring role in states to which they enjoy an effective link. We then highlight a plausible teleological principle that allows us to derive conclusions about states' duties, and how to assess whether those duties have been complied with, from facts about who plays an anchoring role. Finally we use this principle first to establish that, and explain why, states have a duty to prevent statelessness, (a duty that is not only derived from the human right to a nationality, but from the purpose of the nation-state system itself), and second to offer some guidelines for how to assess whether a state has complied with this duty.

What are Sex and Gender and What Do We Want Them to Be?

Ásta (San Francisco State University)

9:00-10:30 Friday April 30, 2021

We are living in times where there is considerable debate over what sex and gender are and who gets to be of what sex and what gender. These are questions that impact people's lives greatly, some more than others. They are metaphysical questions but they also concern what principles we should be guided by when allocating resources, services, and protections to people with potentially different needs. There are also methodological questions in the vicinity. I present a conception of sex and gender and their relation and discuss how to navigate some of the political and material differences.

Women as Victims of 'Misogyny': Re-centering Marginalization

Angela Zhao (University of British Columbia)

11:00-12:30 Saturday May 1, 2021

The question "What is a woman?" has always been contentious in feminist philosophy. Among various views, there is one kind of divergence between the materialist and the pluralist account about whether a woman should be defined or identified based on her typical female biological features. The former is famously defended by Sally Haslanger (among others) who contends that "woman" (in an ameliorative sense) is the social meaning of the female sex – that it is a sex-based or derived concept. Katherine Jenkins, as one of the pluralists, rejects Haslanger's view and argues that one can be a woman without the normatively associated sexual features. In this paper, I argue that, contra Jenkins, the inclusion of transwomen, along with other gender minority groups, requires more than acknowledging their internal identity. Rather, I argue that such an inclusion and/or demarginalization demands the recognition of the significant role of "misogyny" which plays in the total denial of their identity. This recognition, I suggest, is what makes Haslanger's materialist account crucial for establishing the definition of "woman."

Words, Species, and Kinds

James Miller (Durham University)

9:00-10:30 Sunday May 2, 2021

It has been widely argued that words are analogous to species such that words, like species, are natural kinds (e.g., Wetzel 2009, Hawthorne and Lepore 2011, and Kaplan 2011). In this paper, I consider the metaphysics of word-kinds. After arguing against an essentialist approach, I argue that word-kinds are homeostatic property clusters, in line with the dominant approach to other biological and psychological kinds (see Machery 2009, Griffiths 1997, Taylor 2018; 2019).