

ESSENTIALISM

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Rather than one view that goes by the name “essentialism,” there are many. This entry clarifies and emphasizes important differences and other relations between some varieties of essentialism. But it is useful to begin with what most essentialisms have in common. They are views about *belonging*. Most of them further specify the general idea that for some entity to belong to a particular category or individual, it must have certain properties. Those properties are *essential properties* for belonging to the category or individual in question. For example, essentialism about the biological category “platypus” might say that an organism is a platypus *only if* that organism has a certain cluster of genes and a particular ancestry, where these genes and ancestry are essential properties for being a platypus. Essentialism about the March 2011 dissolution of the 40th Canadian Parliament (an individual event in Canadian politics) might say that any event belonged to or was a part of that dissolution *just in case* it was one of the important proximate causes of that dissolution. Additionally, most essentialisms imply that the properties essential for belonging to some category or individual together form the *essence* of (or essence of belonging to) that category or individual. If having a particular cluster of genes and certain ancestry are the *only* essential properties of being a platypus, then together they form the

platypus essence. More generally, an essential property for belonging to X is *necessary* for belonging to X; having the essence for belonging to X is, in ordinary environments, *sufficient*. To see how varieties of essentialism elaborate this basic view in different ways, this entry first discusses *philosophical* essentialisms, including those in metaphysics and philosophy of science that are relevant to thinking about the nature of social science categories such as “economic individual”, “urban city”, “black person”, and “gay man”. The entry then more briefly discusses *psychological* essentialisms concerning folk beliefs about such categories. The discussions reveal how several essentialist views connect with other issues, including categorization of kinds, induction, scientific realism, explanation, social constructivism, reductionism, the psychology of concepts, and social policy.

Philosophical Essentialisms

Of the many philosophical essentialist views and issues, this entry discusses metaphysical and then scientific ones.

Philosophy: Metaphysical Essentialist Views and Issues

Ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle were the first people known to develop essentialist views, typically to address metaphysical problems. These include explaining how anything can be generated out of other things and how a thing can persist through some changes but not others. One might say that a particular platypus can survive the loss of its tail because having a tail is not an essential property for being a platypus.

The popularity of metaphysical essentialisms has fluctuated dramatically since Aristotle’s time. Working in the 1970s on the issue of linguistic reference (e.g., to what do

the terms “Richard Nixon” and “gold” respectively refer?), Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam initiated the present resurgence in metaphysical essentialisms. Some of these abstract from any particular sorts of entities to focus on entities in general (including objects, processes, events, groups, nations, and so on). These views often articulate theories about what properties entities have *necessarily*. A spectrum of such views range from the claim that any entity has all its properties necessarily, as Gottfried Leibniz claimed in the 17th century, to the view that the only properties that any entities have necessarily are trivial ones, such as the property of being either red or not red.

As metaphysicians have made their essentialist views increasingly responsive to work in other fields, general essentialisms have fragmented into more specific views about limited ranges of entities, e.g., linguistic, biological or social entities. Nevertheless some general metaphysical issues arise across several of these narrower views. One issue concerns the *ontological* categories with which essential properties associate. For example take the view that some of an entity’s essential properties are those without which it would not *exist*. Such properties individuate (set apart) the *fundamental kinds* to which entities belong, where “fundamental kind” names an ontological category. The essences formed by these essential properties are *kind essences*. Another sort of kind essence is one that individuates a *non-fundamental* kind, one that an entity can pass in and out of without perishing. The essential properties composing such an essence are required for belonging to the non-fundamental kind, but not necessarily for existing. If “republic” names a kind, it is of this sort; Australia doesn’t currently possess the essential properties for being a republic, but it one day might. Some of the problems that scientists and philosophers of science have perceived for essentialism tacitly presuppose essentialism is only about

fundamental kinds; but many kinds of interest in science are non-fundamental, and so such problems do not afflict them.

All kind essences, whether associated with fundamental kinds or otherwise, are ones that in principle more than one entity can have. Kinds can have more than one member. *Individual essences*, in contrast, are made of properties essential to and had by only one entity. If Australia has an individual essence, it probably involves the unique way it originated.

The ontological issue relates to *identity*. Essences that individuate fundamental kinds determine the metaphysical identities of the members of those kinds. For instance, were *platypus* a fundamental kind, then any organism with the platypus essence would fundamentally *be* a platypus; that essence would fix the organism's identity so that it could not cease to be a platypus without expiring altogether. Interestingly some plausible interpretations of biology suggest that the species that evolutionary theory recognizes are not fundamental (kinds or otherwise), allowing that any organism could survive a change in species, and even belong to no species or more than one. This does not imply that *every* essentialism about these species is hopeless, because it leaves open that each species that evolutionary theory recognizes is individuated by essential properties of the sort associated with non-fundamental kinds such as "republic." An essentialist about social science categories, such as "free market", "woman", or "gay man", likewise need not claim that the essential properties they recognize determine identity.

Identity issues underlie views concerning *locality* of essential properties. Intrinsicism is a common though seldom defended presumption about the locality of essential properties, which says that any essential properties must be *intrinsic* properties

of their bearers. A subject's intrinsic properties are realized by that subject's internal features (e.g., some muscle internal to your chest realizes your property of having a heart). One motivation for intrinsicism applies *only* to essentialism about fundamental kinds. Consider: were any of the essential properties that individuate these kinds not intrinsic, they would be *extrinsic*. A subject's extrinsic properties are realized at least in part by features external to her, such as being related to other entities or processes in particular ways. But if such extrinsic properties are among those essential for belonging to a fundamental kind, then, absurdly, members of those kinds could perish due to changes in their extrinsic conditions and without any internal changes to themselves. In contrast, because the essential properties associated with non-fundamental kinds do not determine identity, they *can* be extrinsic without generating such absurdities. More generally, several authors have argued that there is no barrier to extrinsic property essentialism about non-fundamental kinds, and that we often have good theoretical reasons to recognize these. This allows such forms of essentialism to agree with the common claim that membership in many social categories, such as "free agent" or "Canadian", is (partially or wholly) extrinsically or relationally determined.

Several other metaphysical nuances in contemporary essentialist views belie traditional understandings of essentialisms. Essentialism about kinds is often said to imply *fixity* or *immutability* about hierarchies or networks of kinds, e.g., that all kinds of chemical elements form an unchanging and static set that the periodical table represents. But many essentialisms are compatible with dynamic networks of kinds, where some kinds are generated out of others. Indeed, the chemical elements probably arose in this way. Some authors worry that this ensures that the boundaries of these essentially determined kinds

are *vague*, making non-arbitrary identification of them impossible. Authors such as Elliott Sober reply that there are reasons to think that a kind's having a vague essence and vague boundaries is compatible with it being determinate and non-arbitrary.

Perhaps the most startling check on traditional metaphysical presumptions about essentialism concerns *necessity*. On the increasingly popular homeostatic property cluster (HPC) view of some kinds, no single one of the properties that helps individuate an HPC kind need be necessary for kind membership; rather, some sub-set of these properties is sufficient in each case. If "Irish person" names an ethnic kind, for example, it is probably one of these. There need not be one property that all Irish people share, but rather a cluster of individuating properties of which each has some sub-set, with different Irish people having different sub-sets. (Some other people are neither determinately Irish nor determinately not Irish.) This descendent of Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance would be a non-essentialist view, were it not for the possibility that the individuating cluster *is* necessary rather than any single property in it. On this possibility, although there is no single property that each Irish person must have, to be Irish, a person *must* have some sub-set or other of the properties in the cluster. Such views have been made consistent with Kripke's and Putnam's work on linguistic reference, and define a new form of essentialism that permits the prodigious variation within kinds that dooms many traditional essentialist accounts of those kinds.

Philosophy: Scientific Essentialist Views and Issues

Metaphysical and scientific essentialisms overlap. Work in various sciences and philosophy of science motivates some of the nuanced metaphysical positions described above. In the

other direction, refinements in metaphysics have made essentialist views more applicable in some scientific domains than they previously were. Nevertheless teasing out scientific essentialist views and issues from metaphysical ones clarifies issues both in *general philosophy of science* and in philosophies of *particular sciences*. Take these in turn.

In addition to renewing interest in essentialism among metaphysicians, Kripke and Putnam helped rejuvenate the Aristotelian idea that essentialism is important to empirically minded philosophy of science. They did this partially by convincing many researchers that some scientific inquiry consists in empirical search for, and *a posteriori* discovery of, kind essences. For example, chemistry has involved not only searches for chemical causes of certain phenomena, but also determining what particular chemical elements and compounds *are*. Their results often seem to tie these kinds to *microstructural* essences: having 79 protons is the essence of being a gold atom, and being composed exclusively of H₂O is the essence of being (pure) water. Kripke's and Putnam's intuitively driven thought experiments have had a greater role in inspiring an essential interpretation of some scientific inquiry than their semantic theses.

Brian Ellis has developed an essentialist interpretation of some scientific inquiry, in a view he calls new scientific essentialism. Although he hesitates to apply the view to the social sciences, we will see why others are cautiously optimistic.

Ellis claims that his scientific essentialism best fits the facts of inquiry and discovery in much of physics and chemistry, and that it offers the best philosophical analysis of the laws of nature discovered in those disciplines. Roughly, he proposes that laws of nature are grounded in the microstructural essences of the kinds over which those laws range. The laws are exceptionless *because* the members of the kinds over which the laws range all

possess the essences that make the laws true. According to Ellis those essences are metaphysically necessary and sufficient for kind membership.

On Ellis's view, essential properties of scientific interest must be an important part of the *explanation* of characteristic behaviors of entities that have them. Having 79 protons, for instance, is an important part of the explanation of gold's melting behaviors and interactions with other elements. This explanatory salience of essential properties is supposed to make them relevant to the general philosophy of science issue of *induction* too. The explanatory salience of the essential properties ensures the predictive reliability of generalizations that range over the kinds individuated by those properties.

The new scientific essentialism connects with the further issue of the *proper aims of science*. It supports the traditional view that some sciences do and should aim to construct classifications comprising categories that represent kinds over which generalizations range. The classifications are theories about natural order. These improve as they more accurately represent kinds, laws or generalizations, and relations between these. Whereas empiricists about the aims of science often transform this view into an *instrumentalist* or *anti-realist* one that nowhere appeals to microstructural essences, Ellis argues that his foundational appeal to such essences develops the view into a version of *scientific realism*. He claims that science discovers these *real essences*, discovers *that* they are essences, and that they are intrinsic causal powers that members of corresponding kinds have *determinately without variation*. The kind distinctions they underwrite are then nature's distinctions, not ours: real, absolute, and categorical.

The reality of essential distinctions and the naturalness of kinds are hotly contested issues when one moves from general philosophy of science to the philosophy of particular

social sciences. There is an overwhelming consensus that most of the kinds these sciences study and generalize about are *not* individuated by real essences, and are *socially constructed* rather than natural. Some examples: “individual” and “market” in economics, “black” and “white” in race studies, “capitalist city” in urban sociology, “woman” in feminist political science and sociology, and “emerging adult” in developmental psychology.

When saying that essentialism about these categories is mistaken, most critics mean something like the “absolute” and “categorical” essentialism that Ellis favors for physics and chemistry. However, they typically do not have in mind Ellis’s physical and chemical levels. One of the alternative levels they sometimes have in mind is the genetic level of biology. Any real essence distinctions here are widely thought to fail to account for the boundaries of the mentioned social kinds. This can be called failure of *categorical real genetic essentialism about social kinds* (CRGESK). CRGESK is a non-starter for some social categories. Nobody ever thought that a genetic distinction accounts for the category “middleman.” But for other categories, such as “white male,” the failure of CRGESK is more interesting. This is because the best reason given for this failure leaves open other real essentialist accounts of some social kinds, and some authors note that several debates in social sciences clarify once we appreciate this.

The best reason to reject CRGESK concerns variation and explanation. For any social kind, there are no genetic properties that both a) are shared by all human members of the kinds, and b) explain behaviors common to those members. The evidence for this is inductive, from genetics and population studies. It entails that for social kinds there are no genetic properties that could meet the necessity and explanatory conditions that Ellis places on real essential properties.

This leaves open two (combinable) options for alternative sorts of *biological real essentialism* about some social kinds. First, one can expand the candidate essential properties to biological ones other than genetic ones. For instance, there is some evidence for common and explanatory neurological properties that may individuate *economic individual* as a real kind. These properties may be intrinsic properties of human persons. But as noted above, essential properties need not be intrinsic for non-fundamental kinds that sciences study. Races are conceived as such kinds when authors argue that extrinsic, genealogical properties of people account for the race distinctions between them.

Second, authors such as Ron Mallon have argued that the social kinds in question are HPC kinds. This allows that the properties individuating them, whether neurological, genealogical or of other sorts, need not be possessed by all kind members. The prevalence of variation among members of each social kind would seem to require this modification of any essentialist account of them, whether biological or not. Whether authors *call* the resulting view a new form of “essentialism” is beside the point.

Authors have challenged the above-described essentialist move from genetic to other sorts of biological properties. However, authors are now realizing that the resulting debates between the biologically inclined and their critics are often ill formed. This happens when the socially constructed kinds to which the critics refer, and those to which biologically inclined refer, are not coextensive. Consider: what a biological taxonomist refers to by using race names is sometimes not what the social constructionist has in mind. Although this suggests that parties to some of these debates are talking past one another, a different interpretation is that they tacitly have a normative disagreement about which kinds social scientists *should* focus on and analyze. Uncovering these tacit normative

disagreements has motivated some parties to these debates to change their argumentative strategies, focusing on crucial normative points without epistemic or metaphysical distractions. This is one place, for instance, where practical concerns about the political dangers of *applications* of biological essentialisms have traction that they *cannot* have when it is the mere truth of those essentialisms that is in question.

But even liberalized biological essentialisms often seem to fail to account for the kinds that interest social scientists, because, as social constructivists argue, the explanatory causes of the boundaries of these kinds are *social*. This biological vs. social issue is primarily empirical. For instance, it is an empirical platitude that oppressive political systems are important causes of some of the gender and race distinctions that social science recognizes.

It is crucial to note, however, that social constructionism along these lines is consistent with real, social (rather than or also biological), and HPC essentialist accounts of some social kinds. The *realism* in any such essentialism only requires that the properties that distinguish kinds are or correspond with actual causes of kind distinctions. It does not matter whether the actions of *people* and *social groups* are among these causes. The only social constructionism that is incompatible with a liberalized real essentialism is the extreme sort on which social kind distinctions derive *only from the mere beliefs* (not actions) of social theorizers.

The main motivation for pursuing liberalized real essentialist accounts of social kinds, whether biological or social, is to provide a socially sensitive scientific realist's ground for well-confirmed generalizations that range over those kinds. These generalizations nearly always have exceptions, as expected on a suitably liberalized essentialism. But some of the

versions of metaphysical essentialism described above allow a realist interpretation that permits exceptions. And of course, other avenues to a realist interpretation may be open without utilizing essentialism at all. Likewise, if realism fails this may or may not be related to essentialism.

Psychological Essentialisms

Unlike the philosophical essentialisms discussed above, psychological essentialisms concern which essentialisms (if any) people tend to believe or imply, regardless of which of these beliefs are true or justified. Psychological essentialisms still have philosophical aspects and applications though, and the social sciences, including cognitive anthropology, ethnography, and various fields in psychology, often study them.

The “classical view” of the psychology of everyday category concepts says that we use these as though we define them by tacit appeal to sets of singly necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for instantiating the concepts. This suggests that most people are *metaphysical essentialists* of one stripe or another about everyday categories. Experiments beginning in the 1970s initiated several attacks on and alternatives to this view. For instance, researchers have suggested that instead we are (sometimes from early childhood) *presumptive scientific essentialists* about at least some categories, such as biological ones, or race and ethnicity categories. That is, we assign things to categories on the presumption that there is some set of underlying, typically unobservable, features that they uniquely share and which causally explain many of the observable features characterizing the category. Authors often claim this widespread “essentializing tendency” is innate and evolved, part of a strategy to infer generalizations from experience.

Nick Haslam and Jennifer Whelan review a host of empirical studies that argue that many people are scientific (and often genetic) essentialists in this way about several social categories, including “AIDS patient”, “Jews”, “gay man” (and other sexual orientation categories), gender categories (especially “woman”), personality categories, race and ethnicity categories, and categories of mental disorder. Two clusters of philosophical points about these studies are noteworthy.

First, critics have noted that many of these studies are not appropriately sensitive to the sorts of distinctions between essentialist claims highlighted above. Although some psychologists such as Frank Keil have tried to test between crude essentialisms and nuanced essentialist positions (such as the HPC kinds view) with respect folk beliefs about *everyday objects* and *biological kinds*, research on *social categories* has not reached the same level of conceptual sophistication. There is a concern that this has compromised its conclusions.

Second, many of the studies of folk scientific essentialism about social kinds purport to show that scientific essentialist thinking about some social categories *generates* stereotyping and prejudice. For instance, Nick Haslam and Sheri Levy find a correlation between a) the essentialist belief that the category “gay man” is discrete, and b) anti-gay attitudes towards gay men. They note that researchers often interpret this sort of result to indicate that certain aspects of essentialist thinking about the category “gay man” are *sources* of anti-gay attitudes about gay men, and that this helps *account* for those attitudes. However, it is difficult to find anything in such studies that justifies the inference *from* a correlation between aspects of essentialist thinking and prejudice, *to* the claim that aspects of essentialist thinking cause or explain prejudice. For instance, to adapt one of Nick

Haslam's and Sheri Levy's own remarks, we need finer-grained empirical work to tell whether some essentialist responses made by study participants are (however irrational) *post-hoc* defenses of prior or otherwise-caused prejudice.

Suppose that such further studies happen to justify the causal claims about essentialist thinking. A further caution is known to arise. Researchers sometimes appeal to such causal claims to support negative assessment of essentialist *beliefs*. Ironically, this appeal commits the same sort of naturalistic fallacy that the researchers are tacitly or explicitly criticizing. From any putative essentialist *facts* about social categories, no justifications of *normative* prejudice follow. Likewise, from any putative *facts* about essentialist thinking causing prejudice, no justifications of *normative* dismissal of essentialist belief follows. In the relevant cases, social policy would be better justified and probably practically more effective if it corrected the object of its concern, shifting from essentialist *belief*, to dubious *inferences* from essentialist belief.

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See also: Biology and the Social Sciences; Concepts; Induction and Confirmation; Kinds; Laws of Nature; Race, Theories of; Realism and Anti-Realism in the Social Sciences; Reductionism in the Social Sciences; Social Constructivism

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