

Chapter 2

What Is Gender Essentialism?

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Abstract In this chapter I distinguish among different theories of gender essentialism and sketch out a taxonomy of gender essentialisms. I focus primarily on the difference between essentialism about a kind and essentialism about an individual. I propose that there is an interesting and useful form of gender essentialism that pertains to social individuals. And I argue that this form of gender essentialism, which I call *uniessentialism*, is not vulnerable to standard, feminist criticisms of gender essentialism.

But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations. (Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, VI)

The only dependable test for gender is the truth of a person's life, the lives we live each day. (Jennifer Finney Boylan, *The XY Games*, The New York Times, 8/03/08)

The feminist debate between gender essentialists and anti-essentialists is a deep and enduring one that ranges over broad topics in metaphysics and epistemology, including realism vs. nominalism, nature vs. nurture, individualistic vs. relational conceptions of the self, and individualistic conceptions of the knowing self (and of knowledge) vs. historical and social conceptions of the knowing self (and of knowledge). It seems to me, however, that it is often unclear what notion of essentialism undergirds these debates. One purpose of this chapter is to sketch out a taxonomy of essentialisms in order to clarify what might be at stake in the debate between gender essentialists and anti-essentialists. My second purpose here is to outline a concept of essentialism that I think both survives the standard feminist criticisms of gender essentialism and has potential value for feminist theory. The concept I have in mind (which I call *uniessentialism*) has its roots in Aristotle's metaphysics, but it is fully compatible with a historical and social understanding of gendered individuals.

Uniessentialism is a theory about the unity of individuals, and it holds that individuals are unified and exist as individuals (as opposed to being a heap of parts) by virtue of their essences. For example, a house exists as an individual (as opposed to

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a jumble of house parts) because its parts are organized in a way that realizes the functional essence of a house. The very same house parts stacked at Lowe's lack the uniessence of a house; they are, collectively, a heap and not an individual. Organisms are individuals because their parts realize a functional essence that unifies them into an individual over and above the parts. Analogously, we can think of an individual's gender as providing a normative principle that unifies all that individual's social roles at a time or over time. A social role is itself a set of norms that attach to a social position; for example, an individual who is a mother (social position) ought to care for her children (norm or social role). Unlike the case of the artifact or the biological organism, in the case of social individuals (us) what is organized by gender is our practical agency and the norms that govern it. In *The Metaphysics of Gender* I argue that our gender provides a principle of normative unity for our lives as social individuals, and our gender is, therefore, uniessential to us. Here I am primarily concerned to distinguish uniessentialism from other concepts of essentialism, and to show that it is not vulnerable to standard feminist arguments against gender essentialism.

The idea that gender is uniessential to social individuals is useful for feminism for several reasons. First, and foremost, it articulates the central role that gender plays in our social lives, day by day. So, even though it is true that gender norms vary historically and culturally, it is also true (both historically and cross-culturally) that an individual's gender is, at minimum, a central organizing feature of his or her practical agency. Gender uniessentialism expresses the centrality of our gender in our daily lives and social agency without positing an unchanging, ahistorical, universal essence of womanhood (and manliness) hovering over our heads and tying our hands. In order to begin to make a case for this idea, however, it is necessary to differentiate uniessentialism about gender from other theories of gender essentialism. That is my project here.

I begin by distinguishing between kind and individual essentialism. Essentialism about a kind holds that there is a property or properties definitive of membership in that kind. Essentialism about an individual holds that there is a property or properties that make that individual the individual it is. Here I focus on individual essentialism applied to gender. A further distinction is required, however, to sort out different versions of individual essentialism, namely, to distinguish Aristotle's unification essentialism from Kripke's identity essentialism.

Following my preliminary taxonomy of essentialisms, I focus on uniessentialism. I explain how and why I use uniessentialism to express gender essentialism. I then revisit identity essentialism, and consider the way some philosophers use it to discuss gender (and race) essentialism. The purpose of this section is to clarify the differences between uniessentialism and identity essentialism in relation to the topic of gender essentialism.

Finally, it is useful to round out my taxonomy of essentialisms by considering Locke's distinction between nominal and real essences. Feminist debate concerning essentialism frequently turns on disagreement between gender realists and gender nominalists, and the concepts framing this debate originate with Locke. Some feminists have argued for adopting a theory of nominal essences about gender (Fuss 5;

de Lauretis 3). Others are gender realists (Haslanger; Zack, “*Inclusive*”; Alcoff). As it turns out, however, the realism/nominalism debate among feminists is tangential to my focus here as it concerns the basis for membership in gender kinds.

A Brief Taxonomy of Essentialisms

Traditionally the notion of essence has had two different applications. First, we can think about essences in relation to kinds, and we can ask whether or not a collection of individuals constitutes a kind that is defined by a common and unique property (or properties). An essence in this sense is a property that determines kind membership.¹ In addition, some theories add the requirement that essential properties have causal or explanatory power.² Kinds defined by properties that meet the second requirement are sometimes called “natural kinds” because standard examples of natural kinds include biological species and material substances like water.³ For convenience, let us call essentialism about kinds and the criteria for kind membership, *kind essentialism*.

Many feminists deny that women (and men) are kinds whose members share a defining property, and they reject gender essentialism understood as a claim about kind membership.⁴ In other words, they reject gender realism. Since women (and men) form social kinds or groups, not natural kinds, their membership cannot be defined by a shared property. This argument assumes that only membership in natural kinds (like biological species) could be defined by a common property because only natural kinds are stable and homogenous. In contrast, the features that characterize women (and men) vary over time and across different cultures and, as a result, there are no features that are common to all women (or to all men). Finally, as Elizabeth Spelman argues in *Inessential Woman*, there is also variation within a single culture due to the intersection of gender with other social identities, like race or class. So, even within one culture, there is no possibility of a shared feature or features common to all women or to all men that could determine kind membership.⁵ Those who would advocate gender essentialism (understood as kind essentialism)

¹I differentiate here among collections—e.g., the objects in my garage—that are arbitrary groupings of things; kinds—e.g., red things—that are groupings based on a property that defines its members; and natural kinds—e.g. biological species—that are kinds based on a non-arbitrary, explanatory or causal property. These are not uncontroversial distinctions but as I am not developing a theory of kind essentialism, they are not central to my purpose, and I won’t say more about them.

²Nominal essences, which I discuss at the end of this chapter, do not have causal or explanatory power.

³John Dupre is critical of the view that biological species are natural kinds in *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science*.

⁴For a discussion of the main arguments against gender essentialism see my “Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory.”

⁵The second feature of essential properties, their causal or explanatory role, is not central to feminist criticisms of gender essentialism. Since anti-essentialist feminists tend to argue against the

mistake what is social and variable for what is natural and fixed. I call this the core argument against gender essentialism (“Anti-Essentialism” 324). Further, given the variability of women, kind essentialism will necessarily marginalize and exclude some women by defining kind membership using properties that they do not have. I call this the exclusion argument against gender essentialism (“Anti-Essentialism” 327). I return to these criticisms below, after introducing a second notion of essence.

A second notion of essence is that of a property or characteristic that makes an individual the individual that it is. An essence in this sense is a special kind of property of an individual; the property is necessary, or it tells us what the individual is fundamentally.⁶ Let us call this type of essentialism, *individual essentialism*. The question of what makes an individual the individual it is can be understood in at least two ways, and the two interpretations yield slightly different theories of individual essentialism.

The first way, which yields a view I call *unification essentialism* (or *uniessentialism*), originates with Aristotle. For Aristotle the question “what is it?” asked of an individual substance expands into a question about the unity and organization of material parts into a new individual. He asks: Why do these materials constitute a house? And the answer is that they realize the functional property that defines being a house, which is to shelter humans and animals. Being a shelter for humans and animals is what makes these materials a house rather than a heap of stuff or a sum of parts. The house’s functional property explains why a new, unified individual exists at all.

The second interpretation, which yields a view I call *identity essentialism*, is associated with Kripke. For Kripke the question—What makes an individual be the individual it is?—concerns the identity of the individual. What makes this lectern the very individual it is (as opposed to some other lectern)? One answer is that it must be made from the very materials from which it, in fact, originated. If it had originated from a different piece of wood, then it would not be this very lectern. Its origins are a necessary property of the lectern (“Identity”). Notice that its material origins are not an essential property of the house on the Aristotelian (or unification) understanding of essential property. Hence there is reason to think that these are two different theories of individual essentialism in the sense that they respond to different questions about individuals. Aristotle explains why a new individual exists at all over and above the sum of its material constituents or parts. In contrast, Kripke begins with an existing individual and asks about which of that individual’s properties are necessary to be that very individual.⁷

claim that there is any property common to all women, this condition will receive most of my attention in what follows.

⁶For a discussion of the difference between a modal conception of essentialism, in which the notion of a necessary property is basic, and a conception of essence that answers the question “what is it?” see Fine.

⁷Although individual essentialism is less prominent in feminist discussions than kind essentialism, there is reason to think that many feminists would reject it as well (Alcoff; Butler). One objection might be that it runs counter to the correct view of the self as a subject that chooses,

Let me now return to the core argument and the exclusion argument against gender essentialism. My response to them here will be brief⁸: Neither the core argument nor the exclusion argument establish their conclusions. Let's begin with the core argument. The fact that an individual, institution or kind has a social origin or social definition does not in and of itself rule out essentialism about that individual, institution or kind. Think of Aristotle's house or Kripke's lectern: the fact that they are artifacts does not rule out *ipso facto* that they might have essential properties. The core argument does not—in itself—establish anti-essentialism about gender.

The exclusion argument targets kind essentialism about gender because it holds that the properties proposed to define membership in gender kinds necessarily exclude some women and some men. My response is twofold. First, individual and kind essentialism are, in principle, independent of one another, and so the conclusion of the exclusion argument, even if true, does not apply to individual essentialism, which is my focus. Second, the exclusion argument needs to be supplemented by some other theoretical notion, like that of intersectionality, in order to tell against kind essentialism about gender. Without a theory that shows exclusion to be the inevitable result of attempts to define membership in gender kinds, the exclusion argument works in a cautionary fashion to warn against hasty generalization or over-generalization. If that is right, then the exclusion argument—by itself—does not establish anti-essentialism (or anti-realism) about gender kinds.⁹

As Natalie Stoljar points out, individual and kind essentialism are often not clearly distinguished by feminists who argue against gender essentialism (261). And, as we have just seen, most feminist criticisms of gender essentialism are directed against kind essentialism (or gender realism). My interest in individual essentialism has several sources. First, because individual gender essentialism is relatively unexplored territory, it is still possible to say something interesting and useful about it. But another, more significant, reason for my focus is that individual essentialism seems to express the centrality of gender in our lived experiences. Kind essentialism expresses the powerful political idea that I share something in common with all other women, and provides a basis for political solidarity. But individual essentialism expresses the equally compelling idea that my gender is constitutive of my being the social individual that I am. In my experience most women and

negotiates, rejects, or performs identities like gender. On this view, nothing *makes* the individual man or woman the individual that he or she is, because the identities and self-understandings that make up our social selves are chosen, negotiated, performed, rejected and so on. Those who would advocate gender essentialism according to the second notion, therefore, are mistaking subjects or selves for objects or things—with serious consequences for the possibility of women's agency (including their political activity), women's autonomy, and women's freedom (Alcoff; Butler). I call this the ontological argument against individual essentialism about gender because mistaking self-determining subjects or agents for causally determined objects is an ontological error. I argue in *The Metaphysics of Gender* that this objection fails.

⁸For a more detailed consideration of these arguments against gender essentialism, see my "Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory."

⁹For an argument along similar lines see Mari Mikkola's "Elizabeth Spelman, Gender Realism and Women."

most men think it is simply obvious that their gender is inextricably interwoven in their social existences and identities. This intuition deserves exploration by feminists even though it is not clear what it means or perhaps *because* it is not clear what it means. Finally, it is individual essentialism, rather than kind essentialism, that intersects with questions of agency, and the issue of agency is central to feminist theory.

I use an Aristotelian model to express uniessentialism; the essence is the cause of being of the individual (“Substance”). More precisely, its essence causes these materials or parts to constitute a new individual substance rather than a mere pile of stuff or collection of parts. The numerous social positions that we occupy are systematically unified by our gender; hence, our gender is uniessential to us as social beings. The unity of social agents is not a relationship among material parts; it is a relationship of normative unity among our various social position occupancies. There is much more to say about the concept of normative unity, and I discuss it in some detail in *The Metaphysics of Gender*. Here, I limit my focus to describing my model for uniessentialism and explaining how it applies to gender.

I think that individual and kind essentialism are conceptually independent of one another. On many accounts of “Aristotelian essentialism”, however, the species form (e.g., for humans the property of rationality) is both common to all members of the species *and* essential to the existence of each individual (Spelman; Stoljar, “Essence”; Alcoff). This is not my interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of form and essence, but it is a common and traditional understanding of his view. So, in at least one important example, the two essentialisms are intertwined. If kind and individual essentialism were always related in this way, then there would only be one view to discuss in which the essence is both a universal species form and the cause of being of individuals. But if, as I argue below, individual essentialism and kind essentialism are conceptually independent of one another, and respond to different philosophical issues, then I will not need to defend kind essentialism about gender in order to make my case for individual essentialism.¹⁰

Individual essentialism, as I have just explained, comes in at least two varieties. Unification essentialism asks why a new, unified individual exists over and above a sum of parts or materials. Identity essentialism asks about which properties an individual must have in order to be that very individual, the same individual. Kind essentialism, in contrast, is a view about what property or properties an individual must have in order to be a member of a given kind. What is the relationship between individual and kind essentialism? I will argue that the two essentialisms are—in principle—independent of one another. They are independent of one another because they address distinct philosophical questions. This is true of both varieties of individual essentialism. Let us focus first on the difference between unification essentialism and kind essentialism.

¹⁰I distinguish the two essentialisms in order to define my project not out of a belief that kind essentialism about gender is mistaken.

To see that unification and kind essentialism are—in principle—conceptually independent of one another let us consider the example of a biological organism. We can ask two very different questions about it. First, what makes the organism an individual? An organism, like an animal or a cell, is a composite of many individual parts, and yet it is also an individual itself, not just a collection or sum of individuals. What is it that orders or organizes the individual parts so that they compose a unified individual? It seems that an adequate answer to this question must be a relational property that orders all of the individual parts into a functional unity, and that functional unity is an individual organism. The relational property is the uniessence of the organism; it is by virtue of realizing a particular function that the parts of an organism are unified into an individual. Its function is uniessential to the organism.

A different question is whether or not animals (i.e., individual organisms) should be grouped into species understood as natural kinds and, if they should, what the basis is for these groupings. This is to raise the issue of kind essentialism with respect to animals. But the question of kind essentialism assumes that individual animals (i.e., organisms) exist, and therefore it is raising a different question from the one addressed by unification essentialism. Maybe animals should be grouped into natural kinds? But maybe they should be understood to form populations rather than natural kinds? Maybe species are individuals and their members (i.e., organisms) are parts of the individual? Questions like these are conceptually independent of the question of why an organism is an individual.¹¹

I have used the example of biological organisms to illustrate the different questions raised by unification and kind essentialism and to show that they are conceptually independent of one another—at least in principle. We can draw a parallel distinction with regard to gender essentialism. The property or properties (if there are any) that are shared by all men or by all women and form the basis of gender kinds need not be uniessential to individual men or individual women. For example, it could be the case that the basis for grouping women as a class or kind is that they are recognized to have a certain reproductive function, and yet it not be the case that any individual woman is a unified individual because of her gender. Aristotle differentiated between men and women (the male and the female) because of their different reproductive functions, but he did not think that either men or women were individuals because of their reproductive functions. Rather, he thought that both men and women were constituted as individuals by virtue of the presence of human soul (conceived of functionally) in their bodies. The human soul (conceived of functionally) is uniessential to both individual men and individual women; but men (as a kind) are defined in terms of the male reproductive function, and women (as a kind) are defined in terms of the female reproductive function. Because unification and

¹¹For a good discussion of the ontological status of species, see Marc Ereshefsky's article "Species" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

kind essentialism address different questions it is possible to develop an argument for unification gender essentialism that does not include an argument for kind gender essentialism.¹²

Uniessentialism and Gender

I am interested in the question of whether our gender (being a man, being a woman) is essential to us as social individuals.¹³ In order to explore this issue I use an Aristotelian model to express gender essentialism. For Aristotle the essence is the cause of being of the individual whose essence it is. Both artifacts and biological organisms have material parts that are organized into an individual that is not identical to the sum of its material parts. In both cases we can ask why the material parts constitute a new individual rather than a heap or a collection of parts. Hence, both artifacts and biological organisms have essences in that they both have a principle that explains their existence as individuals. Artifacts and biological individuals are also similar because the principle that explains their existence as individuals is a functional essence. A functional essence is an essential property that explains what the individual is for, what its purpose is and that organizes the parts towards that end. Of course, the origin of the purpose differs in the case of artifacts and natural beings. For artifacts the purpose has an external origin in the intentions and purposes of human beings, whereas the purposes of biological individuals are intrinsic to the organism.

It is important to be clear that the question of why a sum of parts makes up a new individual is not a causal question. To use Aristotle's idiolect, it is important to distinguish between the cause of being (ontological question) and the cause of becoming (causal question). One could ask, for example, about how a house is constructed out of building materials where that would be a question about the process of pouring concrete, building a frame, etc. This is a causal question where the answer specifies the causal factors that produce an individual artifact (or an individual organism). The ontological question is not about the process of generation; rather it focuses upon the existence of an individual, which is not simply the sum of its parts. What explains the existence of an individual? What accounts for the fact that it is an individual?

Here is the Aristotelian model exemplified by an artifact, a house. A sum of material parts that realizes the functional property or properties of a house is a house, and its house functional property is essential to the house. The functional properties of a house unify the building materials (or parts) into a new individual, a house. It is

¹²It is also possible to show that identity essentialism is different from kind essentialism, but I will not pursue that issue here.

¹³For simplicity I refer in what follows to women and men, but I think that the framework I develop could accommodate a third gender if that gender plays an analogous role in the social agency of some individuals as being a man or being a woman does to others. Transgendered individuals, for example, could have their social role occupancies organized by their being transgendered; being transgendered could be the principle of normative unity that unites their social roles and positions.

because these bricks and boards (or these windows and doors) realize the function of providing shelter to humans and animals that an individual house exists. If the very same parts were scattered across a junkyard (or neatly arranged at Lowe's), then they would not realize the house function (providing shelter, etc.) and a house would not exist. Its house functional properties are uniessential to the individual house. The essence explains why a collection of parts are unified into a new individual.

Uniessentialism is not kind essentialism. The two theories address different questions or problems, and the issues or problems are, in principle, independent of one another. Uniessentialism explains why an individual exists rather than a heap. For instance, the house functional properties explain why certain materials are an individual house rather than a mere jumble (or some other artifact). Absent the house functional properties, we would not have an individual; we would have a collection of building materials. In parallel fashion we can ask about why an individual organism exists, e.g., a human being, rather than a collection of body parts (heart, lung, brain). The question of whether, and on what basis, artifacts like houses and natural beings, like organisms, are kinds is—in principle—a conceptually independent question. It may turn out, for example, that biological species are not natural kinds, and that kind essentialism does not hold of biological species, but that finding is—in principle—conceptually independent of the truth of uniessentialism applied to organisms.¹⁴

Uniessentialism is also not identity essentialism. Although the functional essence of the house explains why an individual exists (over and above its parts), it does not thereby secure its particular identity. As far as its function goes, it is just like the house next door. In contrast, identity essentialism asks what makes this individual the very individual it is. In order to be this very individual, a house must be made from the materials actually used to construct it. A human being must originate from the very sperm and egg from which she actually did originate; a lectern must be made from the very wood from which it was, in fact, made. Identity essentialism is also—in principle—independent from kind essentialism because it need not broach the question of artifactual or biological kinds in its investigation of individual identity.

Notice that the uniessential properties of the house are functional properties that are realized in and by its material parts. Functional properties are relational rather than intrinsic properties. A window serves its function in relation to the house as a whole and its other components. Also, the functional properties of artifacts are always enmeshed in a broad social context of use. A house has the function of providing shelter, true, but that function is embedded in various social practices (e.g., architecture), social structures (e.g., patriarchal households) and other conditions. And finally, functional properties have a normative dimension because the function specifies what that object *ought* to do, and not simply what it does. A house with

¹⁴In *The Disorder of Things* John Dupre argues that biological species are not natural kinds. And Eliot Sober in "Evolution, Population Thinking and Essentialism" argues that population thinking has replaced the notion of species in contemporary biology.

a leaky roof is a house, even if it is nonfunctional in relation to its essential task of providing shelter. Because functional properties are normative, it is possible for an individual to have a function that it cannot or does not perform. A house that was flooded by Hurricane Katrina is a house even though it does not (and perhaps cannot) perform its function.

Turning to the application of Aristotle's model to gender: A social individual (or agent) occupies many social positions simultaneously (and many more diachronically), but its gender unifies the sum of social position occupancies into a new social individual. Its gender (being a man, being a woman) is unessential to the social individual. It is worthwhile pausing here to provide a preliminary clarification of two important features of my application of unification essentialism to gender: (1) the claim that gender is essential to social individuals and (2) the unifying role of gender.

My application of the Aristotelian model to gender uses the notion of a social individual, and it is reasonable to wonder exactly what a social individual is. In *The Metaphysics of Gender* I distinguish social individuals from both human organisms and persons. Persons are the individuals who are the loci of rights and responsibilities, who have autonomy, the first person perspective or whatever other feature defines ethical subjects (Baker, "Bodies"; Friedman). By human organisms I mean individuals who are members of the human species, who realize the human genotype or satisfy whatever other criteria are proposed to define membership in the human species. Not every member of the human species is a person (e.g., a baby), and, conversely, there could be persons who are not members of the human species (Baker, "Persons"). Social individuals are those individuals who occupy social positions—indeed, multiple social positions—both synchronically and diachronically. Social individuals differ from human organisms because their actions are bound by social normativity, which is different from biological normativity in two respects. First, social norms are not species-based: they are flexible and variable and differ from culture to culture. Second, the normativity of social normativity requires the recognition by others that an individual is obligated to obey or fulfill the norm. Social individuals differ from persons in that they are necessarily embodied and necessarily exist in a web of social relations.

Let us now consider the second point in need of clarification. In the case of an artifact, the functional essence unifies the material parts into an individual. It is because the building materials are unified and organized so as to realize the property of being a shelter for humans that an individual house exists. But what does the gender functional essence unify in order to constitute a social individual? And what notion of unity is relevant? At any given moment, a social individual occupies multiple roles—professor, parent, etc.—and the question is what unites those social position occupancies so that a social individual exists? How are they unified and organized? A bundle of social position occupancies is not an individual, just as a heap of house parts is not an individual house. Just as the function of providing shelter unifies that heap of boards, nails, etc. into a house, gender is a pervasive and fundamental social position that unifies and determines all our other social positions both synchronically and diachronically. It unifies them not physically, but by providing a principle of normative unity. It is as a woman that I am a parent or a professor

(or whatever the full range of my social roles might be at the moment or over time). Of course, there is much more to be said about normative unity and whether there is a single principle of normative unity or many principles, and I discuss these issues in *The Metaphysics of Gender*.

In this essay, however, I am simply interested in describing unification essentialism applied to gender and distinguishing it from other ways of expressing gender essentialism. I will not give any reason or argument to believe that gender essentialism is true or even plausible. Rather, my goal is to introduce the Aristotelian model as a way of thinking about—or expressing—the unifying role that gender plays in our social lives. In order to continue with the description of unification essentialism and its application to gender, it is useful to contrast it with identity essentialism, and to consider the application of identity essentialism to gender and to race.

Identity Essentialism and Gender

Identity essentialism is intimately connected with modality; an individual's essential properties are its necessary properties. Moreover, Kripke's views on individual essences are articulated within the semantic framework of a theory of reference for proper names. According to Kripke, proper names do not have meanings or senses, but rather refer directly to individuals. (Both the details of this theory, and its application to kind terms (tiger) and substance terms (water) are beyond the scope of this discussion.) Kripke frames the question of the essences of individuals as follows:

Here is a lectern. A question which has often been raised in philosophy is: What are its essential properties? What properties, aside from trivial ones like self-identity, are such that this object has to have them if it exists at all, are such that if an object did not have it, it would not be this object? (86)

In this text Kripke raises the question of the essential features of individuals, what I call individual essentialism.¹⁵ It is important to see that Kripke is not asking us to imagine what changes an artifact like the lectern could undergo and still persist. Rather than thinking temporally about change, we are to think modally, about possibility and necessity. The properties an object *must* have if it exists at all are the properties that if the object did not have them, it would not be that very object. Kripke classifies the necessary properties of individuals into three sorts: properties of origin (a material object must come from the very hunk of matter it did come from), sortal properties (being a lectern is a necessary property of a lectern), and properties of substance (a material object must be made from the kind of matter it is in fact made from). In another text, Kripke discusses the example of the Queen of England, saying that the necessary property of origin is the very sperm and egg from which, in fact, the Queen originated (Kripke). In biological individuals, the necessity of origins is identified with the original genetic materials, the sperm and egg.

¹⁵In “Naming and Necessity” Kripke also discusses the essential features of kinds (like tiger) and stuffs (like water).

As we have just seen, unification essentialism is not formulated using modal notions (possibility, necessity).¹⁶ Further, unlike Kripke's theory, it does not depend upon any particular semantics for those notions or for names and natural kind terms. Unification essentialism is not constructed out of the same theoretical ingredients as Kripke's theory (Witt, "Substance"; Charles). The basic difference, however, concerns what issue the theories address. Unification essentialism asks why a hunk of matter or an assemblage of material parts constitutes an individual. Why does an individual exist at all, over and above a collection of parts? In contrast, Kripke asks of an individual which of its properties it must have in order to be that very individual. What properties must an individual have to be this very individual, the same individual? Although both questions are about individuals and not kinds, they are not the very same questions. For convenience I refer to Kripke's essentialism as identity essentialism because it uses our intuitions concerning the identity of individuals to determine what their essential properties are.

Some philosophers use Kripke's identity essentialism to explore essentialism about race or gender (Appiah; Stoljar, 286; Zack, "Race"). Appiah, for example, explicitly couches his reflections on race, sex and gender in relation to Kripke's theory. Appiah begins by distinguishing between questions of metaphysical or biological identity and questions of ethical identity. Our metaphysical or biological identity is what Kripke was talking about in holding that human beings necessarily come from the very same sperm and egg we actually came from (the necessity of origin applied to biological beings). In this metaphysical/biological context, if I originated from genetic material with XX chromosomes, then, given the necessity of origin, I would not be me unless I was genetically female.¹⁷ We can contrast the biological determinations of female and male with the social roles of being a woman or being a man. It is possible for a biological female to live as a man or a biological male to live as a woman. In relation to this distinction, Appiah introduces the notion of the ethical self. "As many think of them sex—female and male, the biological statuses—and gender—masculine and feminine, the social roles—provide the sharpest model for a distinction between the metaphysical notion of identity that goes with Kripkean theorizing and the notion of identity—the ethical notion—that I am seeking to explore" (77). The ethical self is an individual with projects and a self-conception. In the ethical context, when we ask the question "But would it still be me?", the answer reflects our self-conception as social agents rather than an external metaphysical/scientific truth like the necessity of origin or the biological

¹⁶A separate issue is whether or not Aristotle's uniessentialism supports modal claims. It seems to me that it does support contrary-to-fact statements of potentiality or possibility like "If the wooden parts did not have the function of a house, then they would not constitute a house". But the central focus of Aristotle's theory of essence is their explanatory role in the organization and unity of substances and not the relationship between essences and modality. For a contemporary discussion of the difference between Aristotelian essentialism and contemporary modal essentialism see Fine.

¹⁷Appiah acknowledges that this is an oversimplification of the biological facts. Human sexual identity is determined using several criteria, which do not always line up with one another. For a discussion, see Fausto-Sterling.

determination of sex. Appiah thinks that a change in his gender would usher into existence a new ethical self, whereas a change in his race would not.

I have described Appiah's views in some detail, not so much to take issue with them, but rather to explain that I do not develop individual essentialism about gender along the lines that he pursues. As Appiah sees it, the question of gender essentialism is a question about an individual's ethical or pragmatic self-conception. My approach differs from Appiah's because I do not think that the question of gender essentialism is fundamentally a question about an individual's self-conception. Rather, I believe that our self-conceptions are formed in relation to the social positions that we occupy, and my focus is on the way that our social position occupancies are unified and organized. There is an important, ontological question about the unity of the social individual that is prior to, and independent of, how we understand ourselves. Uniessentialism is a theory that explains how a collection of parts is unified so that a new individual exists, but Appiah's identity approach takes the individual (whether the metaphysical/biological human organism or the ethical self) as a given, and then asks about what conditions must be met to be that very individual.

Finally, let us finish this taxonomy of essentialisms by considering nominal essences. Some feminists argue that Locke's theory of nominal essences provides an account of the meaning of gender terms that is preferable to the Aristotelian approach.¹⁸ For that reason Locke is an important figure in the feminist debates over gender essentialism, and I end my taxonomy of essentialisms with a consideration of his theory in relation to the distinction between individual and kind essentialism.

Nominal and Real Essences

For Locke, the topic of essence arises in his account of language and, in particular, in his account of how we classify individuals into kinds or species. A nominal essence is an abstract idea that corresponds to the meaning of a general word, like "tiger:" or "water". Linguistic meanings are conventional for Locke and consist of the collection of ideas associated with a word: water is liquid, clear, refreshing, etc. Nominal essences are the general ideas that correspond to the terms that we use for classification. A real essence, in contrast, is the material composition—or minute parts—of an object that causes us to perceive it as we do. Real essences are, in principle, unknowable by us since they are the causes of—but not part of—our perceptual experiences that are recorded in the nominal essence. We know they are there, but, according to Locke, we don't know what they are. We might think of the atomic structure of water as H₂O as corresponding to Locke's real essence, keeping in mind that he did not think that the material structure was knowable.

Pretty clearly, Locke's theory of nominal essences pertains to kinds and not individuals. The theory is his response to the traditional interpretation of Aristotle's

¹⁸In addition to Fuss and deLauretis, mentioned earlier, both Alcoff and Battersby find the nominalist theory of gender essences to be preferable to an Aristotelian approach.

doctrine of species forms that are both essential to individuals and the basis for their kind membership. For Locke, in contrast, the nominal essence is an abstract general idea, which we use to classify individuals. There are, of course, many possible ways to classify individuals, and our minds are actively engaged in forming the abstract general ideas that we use to categorize individuals. Locke's theory of nominal essences is a theory of kind essentialism that does not posit any form or feature of the individual that is both essential to it and the basis for its kind membership. Hence, Locke provides the theoretical framework for those feminists who are gender nominalists.

Natalie Stoljar suggests that there is not a sharp distinction between nominal and real essence for social terms like "woman": "For social concepts, the real essence is constituted by the social features of the world given in the definition of the term" ("Essence" 278). For social terms, in effect, there are only nominal essences. Stoljar is critical of the utility of a nominal essence of "woman" for feminist purposes because a nominal essence introduces a social universal "woman" which ignores the real differences among women of different social classes, races, etc.¹⁹

The upshot of this very brief discussion of Locke's nominal essences is that they pertain to kind essentialism and not individual essentialism. Following Stoljar's suggestion, we can bracket the issue of real essences (in the Lockean sense) for social kinds. Those feminists who advocate for nominal essentialism about gender are proposing an anti-realist theory of kind essentialism. Since my primary interest here is in individual essentialism, Locke's theory of nominal essences and its value for feminism is tangential to my central focus.

By distinguishing between kind and individual essentialism, I hope to have opened up a new approach to the issue of gender essentialism. The new approach is important in two respects. First, it shifts our attention from the questions of kind membership with its attendant difficulties of inclusion and exclusion to the unifying role that gender plays in our individual lived experiences. This shift in focus from kind to individual simply opens up a new articulation of what might be meant by gender essentialism, however, and considerations in favor of its truth must wait until another occasion.

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¹⁹See Stoljar's contribution to this volume: "Different Women. Gender and the Realism-Nominalism Debate."

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