

The Metaphysics of Social Groups

Abstract: Social groups, including racial and gender groups and teams and committees, seem to play an important role in our world. This article examines key metaphysical questions regarding groups. I examine answers to the question “Do groups exist?” I argue that worries about puzzles of composition, motivations to accept methodological individualism and a rejection of Racialism support a negative answer to the question. An affirmative answer is supported by arguments that groups are efficacious, indispensable to our best theories and accepted given common sense. Then, I turn to an examination of the features of social groups. I argue that social groups can be divided into (at least) two sorts. Groups of Type 1 are organized social groups like courts and clubs. Groups of Type 2 are groups like Blacks, women, and lesbians. While groups of both sorts have some features in common, they also have marked differences in features. Finally, I turn to views of the nature of social groups. I argue that the difference in features provides evidence that social groups do not have a uniform nature. Teams and committees are structured wholes, while race and gender groups are social kinds.

Social groups seem to play an important role in our world. One’s inclusion in a racial, ethnic or gender group can affect what one can do, how one is treated and how one identifies.

Organized groups like the Supreme Court, the Senate and the House of Commons seem to deliberate, make decisions and write laws. One might root for the Brooklyn Nets, be a fan of Destiny’s Child and be a member of Students for Justice in Palestine. A better understanding of social groups is relevant to our understanding of our world and ourselves. Further, an understanding of the nature of social groups will inform research in ethics, political philosophy, epistemology, the philosophy of action and more. While a metaphysical examination of social groups *and* groups more generally¹ would be fruitful, such an endeavor would require more space than I have here. Given this, I restrict our focus to the metaphysics of social groups, although I note points at which considerations or features appear to hold for groups more generally.

I begin in *I* by examining whether there are social groups. In *II* I turn to the features of social groups. I argue that while all social groups share some features, a distinction can be drawn between organized social groups and social groups that rely on apparent attribute sharing. In *III* I examine views of the nature of groups. I argue that the differences in features outlined in *II* give reason to posit distinct metaphysical views of two sorts of groups.

¹ For example, groups of non-human animals (e.g., flocks of geese and prides of lions), groups of flora (e.g., groves of aspens), groups of ordinary objects (e.g., decks of cards, fleets of ships) and groups that are apparently abstract (e.g., sets).

I. Are There Groups?

The first question to ask in discussing the metaphysics of social groups is the ontological question: Are there groups? Group Eliminativists hold that there are no groups. Group Realists argue that there are groups. Without further specification, the positions are not mutually exclusive, for one might be a Group Realist about some kinds of groups (e.g., teams) and a Group Eliminativist about other sorts of groups (e.g., Latinos). Or, one might be a Group Eliminativist about groups that have agency or mental states, while being a Group Realist about non-agential unconscious groups. Further, the Realist view does not specify what groups are or what features groups have. It is merely an ontological thesis. Let's begin by examining arguments against the existence of groups.

While proponents of Group Eliminativism concede that it is common to think that there are things like teams and to talk as if groups exist and have mental and physical properties, such talk should be explained away. For example Quinton says such ways of talking are “plainly metaphorical” and that “to ascribe mental predicates to a group is always an indirect way of ascribing such predicates to its members” (1975, 17). Nihilists about mereological composition and (most) methodological individualists hold that there are no groups. Others have argued that there are no racial or gender groups. I examine three arguments against the existence of groups here.

First, there are a number of puzzles of composition that have proven difficult to solve. By denying composition, one avoids the puzzles completely. Some eliminativists about composite material objects use these puzzles and a lack of adequate solutions as a reason to reject composite material objects.² Versions of the same arguments could be applied to groups. For example, a puzzle analogous to the Ship of Theseus Puzzle might involve a committee's members being slowly replaced by new members.³ The Puzzle of the Statue and the Clay could be applied to a team and the members that make it up. If one is inclined to adopt eliminativism for ships and statues given such puzzles, one should be inclined to adopt Group Eliminativism, likely in its broadest form thereby rejecting the existence of all groups.

² See, for example, van Inwagen (1990), Unger (1980).

³ The amended puzzle involving saving the Ship's boards and reassembling them introduced by Hobbes could also be applied to groups by “saving” committee members and forming a committee out of them as well.

A second motivation for accepting Group Eliminativism (again in its broadest form) is that it pairs well with methodological individualism, a view adopted by many working in economics, political philosophy and other social sciences.⁴ Methodological individualism⁵ is the view that social phenomena are to be explained and understood wholly in terms of their relations to the intentions and actions of individual actors, rather than any “mysterious” social forces. If all social phenomena are to be explained solely in terms of individuals, social groups, one might argue, are explanatorily irrelevant and should be eliminated from one’s ontology.

Finally, there are arguments focused on rejecting specific sorts of social groups, particularly groups like Blacks, lesbians and women.⁶ I’ll examine only an argument against the existence of racial groups here. Racial Eliminativists⁷ argue that there are no races and no racial groups. Here I set out Appiah’s (1994) argument for Racial Eliminativism. Appiah begins with the now overwhelmingly accepted view that the classical racist views embodied in Racialism are false. According to Racialism races are groups whose members share “certain fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics with one another that they [do] not share with members of any other race” (1994, 80). Appiah argues that if racial terms referred, they would refer either according to a description theory of reference⁸ (what he calls an “ideational” account) or a causal-historical theory of reference⁹ (what he calls a “referential” account). He argues that both rely on the truth of Racialism in terms of the satisfaction of racist descriptions or a having a common natural essence. Appiah argues that the falsity of Racialism, entails that ‘race’ and all racial terms do not refer. So, he concludes, there are no racial groups. Similarly, one might argue that women or lesbians do not exist as both notions rely on a false sexist or homophobic view that there is a set of descriptions or an essence shared by all women or by all lesbians. Next I

⁴ Although see List and Pettit (2011) for the development of a view that rejects Group Eliminativism while conforming to methodological individualism.

⁵ The view originated in the work of Max Weber and had prominent proponents in the economist Hayek and the philosopher Popper.

⁶ Arguments like these might be given by one who holds that some groups exist (e.g., teams), but other sorts of groups (e.g., gender and racial groups) do not.

⁷ See, for example Appiah (1994), Zach (1993) and Muir (1993).

⁸ As held by, for example, Frege (1893) and Russell (1919).

⁹ As originally argued for by Mill and later Kripke (1980).

turn to arguments for Group Realism, beginning with a response to Appiah's argument for Group Eliminativism.

Many have argued for Group Realism for racial, gender, ethnic and sexual orientation groups given their causal, normative and other social effects. Anything efficacious exists, so, the argument goes, groups exist. Being part of a racial group can substantially affect one's experiences, what one can do and how one is treated. It has been argued that eliminativism about racial or gender groups fails to capture this.¹⁰ For example, Haslanger argues that we need a way of thinking of gender groups "that acknowledges the causal impact of classification" (2003, 315). Blum (2010) argues that Appiah fails to distinguish between races as characterized by Racialism and racialized groups. Blum argues that "racialized groups are characterized by forms of experience they have undergone and a sociohistorical identity that they possess *because of* the false attributions to them ... of innate biobehavioral tendencies" (2010, 300). In this way he accepts the obvious falsity of Racialism without adopting Group Eliminativism.

A further argument for Group Realism could be made in the form of an indispensability argument. Putnam (1979) and Quine (1976) first proposed indispensability arguments as arguments for the existence of mathematical entities. Abstracting from their particular arguments, the general form of an indispensability argument we'll consider here is:

1. We ought to include in our ontology all [and only] entities that are indispensable to our best [scientific] theories.
2. Groups are indispensable to our best [scientific] theories.
3. So, we ought to include groups in our ontology.

Two comments are required regarding the material in brackets. The first premise could be formulated as merely a sufficient condition, rather than as both necessary and sufficient. If one is arguing for Group Realism through appeal to an indispensability argument, one needn't hold that the only entities that should be included in one's ontology are those that are indispensable. One could appeal to indispensability as just one way to incur an ontological commitment. Second, 'scientific' is included in brackets. One might hold that social groups are not indispensable for our best theories of, say, physics or chemistry, but that groups are indispensable to our best theories of society or language or psychology. One

¹⁰ See, for example, Haslanger (2003), James (2004), Mills (1998), Piper (1996), Root (2000), Sundstrom (2002).

could still appeal to an indispensability-style argument, although it would be quite removed from the original versions developed by Quine and Putnam.

List and Pettit (2012) give something close to an indispensability argument for groups in developing a view of group agents. They argue that group agents “display patterns of collective behavior that will be lost on us if we keep our gaze fixed on the individual level” (2012, 6). While they may not be making the strong claim that groups are indispensable for a complete theory of agency, they are claiming that certain patterns will be less accessible without theorizing about groups in addition to individuals. Giving and defending an indispensability-style argument for Group Realism would require developing theories and arguing that the theories must include something like reference to or quantification over groups. Many may have doubts about whether any theory could require groups, particularly as some may doubt whether our best theories will require more than fundamental particles. Here my aim is not to mount a defense of an indispensability argument for Group Realism, but to sketch a strategy a Group Realist might take to do so. To make the style of argument slightly more concrete, I sketch an indispensability argument for groups based on semantic theories for natural language.

Suppose that one holds that we are ontologically committed to possible worlds given that worlds are indispensable in a semantic theory of ordinary modal claims or that we are committed to times given that they are indispensable to a semantic theory of tensed language. Similarly, one might hold that given the way we talk, we are committed to groups. English contains collective nouns like ‘team’ and ‘committee’. In formulating a semantic theory of natural language, collective nouns will need to be given semantic values. One might hold that the range of ways we use collective nouns can only be captured by a semantic theory that attributes to our collective noun involving theories a commitment to groups. For example, one might argue that to capture data like the following, groups are required as semantic values.

A: My favorite team made it to the playoffs! It has the best record in the league, so I bet it will win!

The availability of a singular pronoun gives some evidence that collective nouns can refer to wholes. If the only adequate semantic theories attribute a commitment to groups, one might hold that groups are indispensable to a theory of language. Insofar as one is motivated by

what one's theories say and entail exist¹¹, one should be motivated to accept that groups exist. Again, I am not arguing that an indispensability argument succeeds, as far more data and extensive theories would need to be examined and compared. I am only noting one way one might argue for Group Realism. Further, even if indispensability arguments deliver support for Group Realism, they fail to deliver any verdict about the features or nature of groups. This marks a difference between indispensability style arguments and arguments based on efficacy, as the latter rely on groups having certain kinds of features.

A final motivation for Group Realism relies on common sense. Common sense tells us that there are humans, tables and trees. Similarly, common sense tells us that there are teams, committees, African Americans and men. Outside philosophy (and even within philosophy) arguments are not often made for claims that seem obvious. If one is not convinced by the arguments for Group Eliminativism, common sense might be enough to convince one of the truth of Group Realism.

I have canvassed arguments for Group Eliminativism and Group Realism. While I take it that the justification for Group Realism (at least about some kinds of groups) is greater than that for Eliminativism, there is not space to fully adjudicate the debate here. In the next section I turn to features of social groups. I argue that a distinction in types of social groups can be drawn in terms of differences in their features. This may be seen as additional motivation for Group Realism, as the view that there are groups can better explain why features would be shared in this way.

II. Features of Social Groups

All social groups share some features. Social groups allow for variation in their members across both times and worlds.¹² You might be a member of a committee this year that you weren't on last year and that you won't be on next year. The birth of a child might bring another African American into the world. While LeBron James is actually on the Cleveland Cavaliers there are worlds at which he is not. Further, social groups can be

¹¹ For instance, in following a methodology inspired by Quine (1948).

¹² Many other groups appear to allow for temporal and modal variations in members as well. For example, a flock of sheep might gain or lose a member. The Channel Islands might have been fewer in number had Ortac never been formed. If sets are a kind of group, this feature is not shared by all groups as sets have their members eternally and with necessity.

extensionally coincident and numerically distinct.¹³ All and only the members of a baseball team might be the members of a book club. Even though extensionally coincident, common sense tells us that the team and the club are distinct. If all and only women were African Americans, it is natural to suppose that there are still two social groups.¹⁴

In addition to features shared among social groups, there are features that distinguish classes of social groups. First, some social groups' identity conditions rely on the way they are organized or structured. For example, a baseball team's persistence seems to require some things playing functional roles (e.g., pitcher and catcher) that are specified by its organizational structure. The baseball team would not persist if it had no organization, as then it would be merely some individuals. Moreover, it would not persist if its organization were radically altered to include only roles for a president, vice president and treasurer. Having a particular structure or organization is not relevant to the identity conditions of groups like Latinos, gays or whites. There is a distinction between organized social groups and unorganized social groups.¹⁵

In addition to being organized, groups like teams, committees and courts require some sort of shared or collective intentionality.¹⁶ Individuals who want to form a team may

¹³ Many hold that there cannot be coincident non-identical objects. Even those who hold that there can be coincident objects, e.g., Fine (2008) take such entities to be of different kinds (e.g., a quantity of wood and a tree). There can be social groups of the same sort (e.g., a high school basketball team and an intermural basketball team) that are coincident, yet not identical. Further, this feature seems to be distinctive of social groups rather than being shared by groups more generally. For example, it seems that there cannot be "two" extensionally coincident armies of ants.

¹⁴ There are interesting issues having to do with counting social groups. Intersectionality argues that causal and experiential effects cannot be captured by supposing that one's social identities (e.g., being a woman or being Black) are simply added together. Instead, intersectionality argues that interactions between identities often lead to distinct forms of oppression and privilege. Given that one motivation for Group Realism was to capture causal and experiential effects, instead of only specifying social groups along one dimension (e.g., gender), social groups should perhaps also be specified in a more fine grained way (e.g., Black straight women, Black straight men). This would lead to differences in counting for in addition to social groups like women, men, and African Americans there would also be African American women, straight white women and so on. Thank you to [OMITTED] for making this point. For discussions of intersectionality see, for example, Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (2000).

¹⁵ By calling racial, ethnic, gender and sexual orientation groups "unorganized social groups" I do not mean that individuals in such groups could not adopt an organizational structure. Instead, I mean that such groups' identity conditions do not *rely* on an organizational element.

¹⁶ Theories of shared or collective intentionality have been proposed by Bratman (1999, 2014), Gilbert (1989, 2006), Searle (1990, 1995, 2010) and Tuomela (1995, 2002) and others. However, the examples they utilize usually involve agents who do not form a team, committee or other organized group. Their analyses could still be applied in terms of groups, but might also be amended to include reliance on a group's organization or other features.

have a shared intention to that effect.¹⁷ Upon formation, the members of the team will need to cooperate in shared plans and actions. The roles required by the organization of the social group will require functional integration and many will require cooperation in plans and actions. Members of organized social groups are required to act in ways defined by the roles they play. In contrast, members of racial and gender groups do not need to intend to cooperate or act in concord with other members of the group. Individuals who are taken to be members of such groups might even have intentions not to be classed in the way they are or not to act in the ways that are expected for members of their group. Nevertheless, in many cases individuals will continue to be members of the groups with which others identify them.

Social groups can also be distinguished in terms of the volition conditions members operate under. While all social groups allow for variations in members across times and worlds, some groups allow members greater volition in the joining or leaving of a group. For example, as a college student one could decide to join or leave the debate team. While there may be pressures (not) to join or (not) to leave, it is largely up to the individual whether she joins or leaves the team. When tryouts and contracts are involved, potential or actual members of an organized social group might have less freedom in deciding to join or leave. However, even in such cases, an individual can decide to try-out or not; she can decide to break her contract or not. Other social groups are different. For example, whether one is member of a racial group is not something one can change. Being a member of an ethnic, gender or sexual orientation group is also either unchangeable or much more difficult for an individual to determine.¹⁸

Last, membership in racial, ethnic, gender and sexual orientation groups seems to rely on some apparently shared features. For example, features like one's skin color, eye shape, hair texture and ancestry may be relevant to the way individuals are racialized or categorized in a racial group. Alternatively, the feature of being assigned a particular status

¹⁷ Groups might also be formed through, for example, presidential fiat. In such cases group members may have no shared or collective intentions during the formation process. However, it seems that for the group to persist, the members must come to cooperate and have some shared or collective intentions.

¹⁸ I do not mean for this to be exclusionary to transgender individuals. Some transgender individuals may identify themselves as having left one gender group and having joined another, while other transgender individuals may take themselves to have been in the gender group of the gender they identify with all along. So, while movement is possible, it is certainly more difficult than joining or leaving a team or club. A distinction can still be made.

might be what makes one a member of some racial, gender or sexual orientation group. In *Section III*, I examine views of social properties, the having of which constitutes inclusion in a particular social group. In contrast, the members of organized social groups are not determined by the sharing of features. Instead, individuals are members of organized social groups like teams or committees due to successfully carrying out particular roles (e.g., playing the role of pitcher or treasurer) and perhaps having the right sorts of intentions.

To summarize, I have argued that there is a distinction between (at least) two sorts of social groups.¹⁹ The following table captures the similarities and differences between these classes of social groups.²⁰

	Type 1: Teams, Committees, Clubs, Courts	Type 2: Racial Groups, Gender Groups, Ethnic Groups, Sexual Orientation Groups
Membership Variability (across Times and Worlds)	Yes	Yes
Non-Identical Coincidents	Yes	Yes
Must have Structural- Functional Organization	Yes	No
Members Must have Shared/Collective Intentionality	Yes	No
Member Volition	Yes	No (or more limited/difficult)
Shared Feature(s)	No	Yes

¹⁹ Groups like mobs and a queue of people in line for a bus do not neatly fall under either category of groups. If one is a Group Realist about such groups, one will need to add another category that doesn't rely on structural organization or shared features (other than spatial proximity). Alternatively, one might hold Group Eliminativism about mobs and queues.

²⁰ Groups generally seem to be the sorts of things with more than one member. This feature was not included in the discussion here, as it seems that it is not necessary for groups to always have multiple members. For example, it seems that all the Senators except the Senate majority leader might resign on Monday and be replaced on Tuesday. While intuitions may differ, one view is that the Senate on Monday is the same group as the Senate on Tuesday (although it has primarily distinct members). Given cases like these, I did not include the condition that groups *must* have multiple members.

In the final section I examine views on the nature of social groups of Type 1 and Type 2.

III. What are Social Groups?

In the last section we saw that a distinction between two types of groups can be drawn based on the way they pattern in terms of particular features. Since the features of groups of Type 1 and Type 2 are distinct, distinct views of their metaphysical natures could be given. Here I begin by examining views that could take groups of Type 1 and Type 2 to be of a single sort. Then I examine views of social groups specifically of Type 1 and those of groups specifically of Type 2.

Uzquiano (2004) argued for a view on which groups of Type 1 are *sui generis*. One might adopt a *sui generis* view of the nature of groups of Type 2 as well. Positing entities of a *sui generis* kind should be a last resort. If more can be said about social groups' natures and identity conditions, it would be preferable to avoid positing new *sui generis* kinds. Next, I examine views on which groups are not *sui generis* entities.

First, one might adopt a view of social groups as mereological fusions. A proponent of the view that groups are fusions holds that the members of a class combine, or fuse, to form a whole. There are various ways a fusion view of groups might be spelled out. Since one feature of groups is that they can vary in members across times, here I consider a view on which parthood is extensional, but relativized to times. A fusion can then be defined using Sider's definition: "x is a fusion at a time, t, of a class, S, iff (1) every member of S is a part of x at t, and (2) every part of x at t overlaps-at-t some member of S" (2001, 58). The parthood conditions for such fusions are relativized to times, so something can be a part of a fusion x at time t₁ and not at time t₂. The identity conditions are purely extensional. So, fusions x and y are identical at time t just in case they have all and only the same parts. Given this, the ability for two groups to be coincident but not identical cannot be captured. We saw that groups of Type 1 and Type 2 have this feature, so the view that groups are fusions is in trouble.²¹ Further, the fusion view fails to capture the organizational component and required intentions for groups of Type 1. It also fails to capture that groups of Type 2 seem

²¹ One may appeal to counterparts or modal parts to try to allow for non-identical coincident objects. Since there are other ways in which the view fails to capture features of groups of Type 1 and Type 2 I do not consider this way to alter the fusion view here.

to involve a shared feature and are more difficult for members to join or leave. The view that groups are fusions fails for groups of Type 1 and 2.

Since groups are things with members and sets are entities with members, one might argue that groups are sets. While there are immediate problems with a simple view of groups as sets (e.g., sets cannot and groups can vary in members across times and worlds), a more complicated view has been developed. Effingham (2010) argues that groups like teams and committees are a sophisticated sort of set. The view might be extended to groups of Type 2 as well. Effingham argues that groups are sets with ordered pairs as members. The first member of each ordered pair is a world. The second is a set of ordered pairs. These ordered pairs have a time as their first element and sets of members (or the null set) as their second member. So, for example, a group which at w_1 at t_1 has Devin, Dante and Amanda as members and at w_1 and t_2 has Devin and Bert as members would be identified with a set like the following:

$$\{ \langle w_1, \{ \langle t_1, \{ \text{Devin, Dante, Amanda} \} \rangle, \langle t_2, \{ \text{Devin, Bert} \} \rangle, \dots \rangle, \langle w_2, \dots \rangle, \dots, \langle w_n, \dots \rangle \}.$$

If group members are identified with the entities that are members of the set which is the second member of the order pairs that have times as their first members, then groups can change members across times and worlds. However, the view fails to capture that groups of Type 1 are organized and rely on member intentions. It fails to capture that groups of Type 2 involve shared features and are difficult for a member to choose to join or leave.²² If the features social groups have are to be explained by their natures, rather than as accidental unexplained generalities, a different view of groups should be offered. Moreover, as groups of Type 1 and Type 2 have distinct features, distinct metaphysical views should be offered. Next, I turn to what I take to be the best view of groups of Type 1 on offer. Then, I examine ways to understand the nature of groups of Type 2.

The views of groups just considered fail to capture the structural-functional organization of groups of Type 1. Here I argue for a view that takes both structure and having members to be necessary features of groups of Type 1. In my (OMITTED) I argued for a view on which groups of Type 1 are realizations of structures. The view has similarities with the Neo-Aristotelian views of Fine (1999) and Koslicki (2008) on which the identity

²² See my [OMITTED] for some additional worries with the view that groups are sets.

and persistence conditions of objects rely on both structure and matter.²³ Here I very briefly lay out a view of groups as structured wholes.

The structure of a group²⁴ captures the group's functional organization. The structure is composed of nodes²⁵ and edges. Edges capture relations that hold between nodes. The relations are largely functional. They might be hierarchical (e.g., reporting to a higher officer) or non-hierarchical (e.g., pitching the ball to). A node is defined in terms of its relations to other nodes, which are captured by edges.

When a group of Type 1 exists it has both a structure and some members which occupy the nodes in the structure. Something occupies a node in a structure if it stands in the relations required by the node. This might require acting in certain ways and having particular kinds of intentions (e.g., intending to throw the ball to the catcher). As many relations will require multiple relata, some thing occupying a node may require other things to occupy other nodes.

The persistence of a group allows for change in membership given the following understanding of group membership:

Some things, X, are the members of group G with structure S at t and w if, and only if, X occupy the nodes of S (which requires that X are functionally related in the ways required by S).

Some individual is then a member of G at t at w if it is among X. Since individuals can begin or cease to play the roles required by nodes, the definition of persistence allows for individuals to join or leave a group. Further, given that an individual might *choose* to play or not to play a role required by a node in a group structure, individuals have significant volitional control over their leaving or joining a group. The identity conditions for groups of Type 1 can be defined as:

(IDENTITY) A group G_1 and a group G_2 are identical if, and only if,
(1) for all t and all w, the structure of G_1 at t at w is identical to the structure of G_2 at t at w, and
(2) for all t and all w and all x, x occupies node n in the structure of G_1 at t at w if, and only if, x occupies n in the structure of G_2 at t at w.

²³ The views of Fine and Koslicki are meant to be general metaphysical views, not views restricted to the metaphysics of groups.

²⁴ What Koslicki (2008) calls a "formal component" and Fine (1999) describes as "an intensional or conceptual element" that is relevant to an object's identity (1999, 73).

²⁵ What Shapiro (1997) calls 'places'.

Given this definition, groups can vary in members across times and worlds. Further, two groups can be extensionally coincident and non-identical if they vary in members at other times or worlds or differ in structure. While more should be said about what group structures are, how external features factor into a group's identity conditions and how or whether groups are different from other structured objects. The view that groups of Type 1 are realizations of structures or structured wholes is more promising than other views of groups on offer.

Since groups of Type 2 do not require structural organization and seem to require some shared features, a distinct view of groups of Type 2 is needed. Groups of Type 2 were partially distinguished from groups of Type 1 in terms of members sharing a feature. Given this, a view on which groups of Type 2 are kinds seems promising, as kinds are feature-sharing groups. Members of racial groups, gender groups, sexual orientation groups, etc. do not share a natural essence, so such groups cannot be identified with natural kinds. Instead, it has been proposed that such groups should be identified with social kinds.

Social kinds are groups that share a social property. Such properties are socially constructed. Since social kinds are specified in terms of socially constructed properties, they too are socially constructed. "Social construction" has been used in two general ways. First it has been used as a label for an eliminativist view.²⁶ On this reading of "social construction" saying racial or gender groups are social constructions is not to argue for a metaphysical view of the nature of the such groups, but rather to claim that Group Eliminativism is true. In contrast, the second sense involves adopting Group Realism and involves views that take groups to be constructed by society in some way. For instance, Alcoff takes something being socially constructed to require that the thing is "a contingent product of social practices rather than a natural kind" (2005, 234). While contingent, the groups may seem to be necessary or natural. For example Beauvoir claimed that "social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature" (Beauvoir 1972, 18). I will use "social construction" in this second sense.

Social construction might be understood in causal or constitutive terms. Haslanger draws the distinction in the following way:

²⁶ See, for example, Gracia (2005).

X is socially constructed *causally* as an F iff social factors play a significant role in causing X to have those features by virtue of which it counts as an F .

X is socially constructed *constitutively* as an F iff X is of a kind or sort F such that in defining what it is to be F we must make reference to social factors.²⁷

Those who adopt a constitutive view can accept that social factors play a causal role, while arguing that more is required. For example, Thomasson takes social entities to be dependent on collective intentionality. She argues that the dependence is metaphysical or conceptual, stating that “it clearly doesn’t make any sense to think such things could exist without collective ... intentions” (2009, 546). In contrast, proponents of the causal view²⁸ take a causal connection between social factors and the features of an entity that make it a social entity to be sufficient for the entity to be socially constructed.

Both sorts of social construction rely on features or properties. Properties that are used to classify social groups of Type 2 could also be understood as causally socially constructed, constitutively socially constructed or both. On a constitutive account having particular natural properties (e.g., having dark skin, having particular genitalia) constitutes one counting as F (e.g., Latino, a man) in context C .^{29,30} In contrast, one might adopt a purely causal response-dependent account. On this view someone is a lesbian just in case some features of the individual cause some response in others.³¹ Finally, one might adopt a view on which social properties are socially constructed in causal and constitutive ways. Sveinsdottir’s (2013) account of social properties takes a person to have the property of, for example, being a woman due to it being conferred or assigned to the person. A person, x , is a woman in context C when the property *being a woman* is conferred on x in C . On this account conferring might be taken to be both causal (as it is an action) and constitutive (as it is the factor that is relevant in the application of a property). However one views the social construction of social properties, social kinds will groups whose members share some social properties.

²⁷ (2003, 317-318)

²⁸ For example, Hacking (1999)

²⁹ See Searle (1995) for an account like this.

³⁰ This account will have a more difficult time allowing for social groups to be understood as independent of natural properties. For example, it may have difficulties allowing for gender to be independent of genitalia. I thank [OMITTED] for bringing this point to my attention.

³¹ See Johnston (1991) and Pettit (1991) for developments of response dependent views of properties and concepts.

The view that groups of Type 2 are social kinds accounts for the other features canvassed above. It allows for variation in members across times and worlds, as different things can have a property at distinct times and worlds. Since social kinds are classified according to properties, two kinds might be extensionally coincident but not identical due to a difference in the property. Finally, the view that groups of Type 2 are social kinds captures the difficulty in joining or leaving such groups. On any of the construals of social properties, factors outside of an individual's control are relevant to having the social properties that define social kinds. So, it may be outside of an individual's control whether she can join or leave such groups.

IV. Conclusion

There are many interesting questions related to social groups that I was not able to address here, in particular questions relating to social groups' epistemic and normative statuses. For example, here I did not examine questions about whether and how groups might testify, have beliefs, desires or intentions.³² I also did not have space to examine the debate on whether groups can be agents or persons.³³ Finally, I did not address the normative status of groups, in terms of groups being held responsible or morally relevant or in the way in which one's inclusion in a group might be normatively relevant.³⁴ Instead, my focus was on central ontological and metaphysical questions about social groups. I gave arguments for and against the existence of social groups. I argued that social groups like teams and committees on the one hand and racial and gender groups on the other have distinct features. Given this, I argued that distinct views of social groups are needed.

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³² See for example, Fricker (2012), Lackey (ms), List and Pettit (2011)

³³ See, for example, List and Pettit (2011), O'Madagain (2012), Hess (2013)

³⁴ See, for example, Hess (2013, 2014)

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