
2019 CONFERENCE ON ESSENTIALISM AND
ANTI-ESSENTIALISM



3RD ANNUAL MEETING OF THE **CANADIAN METAPHYSICS**
COLLABORATIVE

September 26-29, 2019

Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada

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CONFERENCE DESCRIPTION



Essences have traditionally been assigned important but controversial explanatory roles in philosophical, scientific and social theorizing. Anti-essentialists and conventionalists of various stripes, however, often regard essentialism as a vestige of ancient and medieval thought, or worse, as politically and socially repressive and dangerous. This conference aims to encourage dialogue between essentialists and anti-essentialists across different sub-disciplines within philosophy, including (but not limited to) feminist philosophy, history of philosophy, metaphysics, philosophy of biology, philosophy of science, and social ontology. This event coincides with the third annual meeting of the Canadian Metaphysics Collaborative.

Conference Organizer:
Kathrin Koslicki (University of Alberta)
Graduate Research Assistant:
Esther Rosario (University of Alberta)

This conference was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Speakers, Commentators, and Chairs



Speaker: Nancy Bauer (Tufts)

Title: “Trans Women Are Women: Full-Stop”

Commentator: [Rebecca Mason \(University of San Francisco\)](#)

Chair: Danielle Brown (University of Alberta)

Speaker: Kristina Gehrman (University of Tennessee, Knoxville)

Title: “Generics and Character-Based Evaluation”

Commentator: [David Liebesman \(University of Calgary\)](#)

Chair: Jeff Pelletier (University of Alberta)

Speaker: Christian Kanzian (University of Innsbruck)

Title: “The Essence of Artifacts”

Commentator: [Amie Thomasson \(Dartmouth\)](#)

Chair: Allen Hazen (University of Alberta)

Speaker: Ka Ho Lam (University of Alberta)

Title: “The Realism of Taxonomic Pluralism”

Commentator: [Tuomas Tahko \(University of Bristol\)](#)

Chair: Ataollah Hashemi (Saint Louis University)

Speaker: Theodore Locke (Concordia University Montréal)

Title: “Metaphysical Explanations for Modal Normativists”

Commentator: [Michael De \(Utrecht University\)](#)

Chair: Bernard Linsky (University of Alberta)

Speaker: Anna Marmodoro (Durham)

Title: “Instantiating Structure versus Essence”

Commentator: [Marilù Papandreou \(LMU Munich\)](#)
Chair: [Amy Schmitter \(University of Alberta\)](#)

Speaker: [Christof Rapp \(LMU Munich\)](#)
Title: “Essentialism in Aristotle’s Categories and Topics”
Commentator: [Chris Shields \(Notre Dame\)](#)
Chair: [Margaret Cameron \(University of Melbourne\)](#)

Speaker: [Mark Richard \(Harvard\)](#)
Title: “Is Reference Essential to Meaning?”
Commentator: [Kirk Ludwig \(Indiana\)](#)
Chair: [Roberta Ballarin \(University of British Columbia\)](#)

Speaker: [Katherine Ritchie \(CUNY Graduate and City University of New York\)](#)
Title: “Essentializing Language and the Prospects for Ameliorative Projects”
Commentator: [Esther Rosario \(University of Alberta\)](#)
Chair: [Hillary Nye \(University of Alberta\)](#)

Speaker: [C. Kenneth Waters \(University of Calgary\)](#)
Title: “Scientific Metaphysics of Hierarchy”
Commentator: [Ingo Brigandt \(University of Alberta\)](#)
Chair: [Michael Raven \(University of Victoria\)](#)

SCHEDULE

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2019

5.30 to 7.30 pm Dinner

All sessions will be held in the Professional Development Centre:

Room PDC 103

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2019

7.00 to 8.30 am	Breakfast
8.30 to 9.30 am	Speaker: Anna Marmodoro (Durham) “Instantiating Structure versus Essence” Commentator: Marilù Papandreou (LMU Munich) Chair: Amy Schmitter (University of Alberta)
9.30 am to 9.45 am	Break
9.45 to 10.45 am	Speaker: Christof Rapp (LMU Munich) “Essentialism in Aristotle’s Categories and Topics” Commentator: Chris Shields (Notre Dame) Chair: Margaret Cameron (Melbourne)
10.45 am to 11.00 am	Break
11.00 am to 12.00 pm	Speaker: Christian Kanzian (University of Innsbruck) “The Essence of Artifacts” Commentator: Amie Thomasson (Dartmouth) Chair: Allen Hazen (University of Alberta)
12.00 to 1.30 pm	Lunch
1.30 to 2.30 pm	Speaker: Theodore Locke (Concordia Montréal) “Metaphysical Explanations for Modal Normativists” Commentator: Michael De (Utrecht University) Chair: Bernard Linsky (University of Alberta)
2.30 to 2.45 pm	Break
2.45 to 3.45 pm	Speaker: Nancy Bauer (Tufts) “Trans Women Are Women: Full-Stop” Commentator: Rebecca Mason (University of San Francisco) Chair: Danielle Brown (University of Alberta)
5.30 to 7.30 pm	Dinner

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2019

7.00 to 8.30 am	Breakfast
8.30 to 9.30 am	Speaker: Mark Richard (Harvard) “Is Reference Essential to Meaning?” Commentator: Kirk Ludwig (Indiana) Chair: Roberta Ballarin (University of British Columbia)
9.30 to 9.45 am	Break
9.45 to 10.45 am	Speaker: Katherine Ritchie (CUNY Graduate and City University of New York) “Essentializing Language and the Prospects for Ameliorative Projects” Commentator: Esther Rosario (University of Alberta) Chair: Hillary Nye (University of Alberta)
10.45 to 11.00 am	Break
11.00 am to 12.00 pm	Speaker: Kristina Gehrman (University of Tennessee, Knoxville) “Generics and Character-Based Evaluation” Commentator: David Liebesman (University of Calgary) Chair: Jeff Pelletier (University of Alberta)
12.00 to 1.30 pm	Lunch
1.30 to 2.30	Speaker: Ka Ho Lam (University of Alberta) “The Realism of Taxonomic Pluralism” Commentator: Tuomas Tahko (University of Bristol) Chair: Ataollah Hashemi (Saint Louis University)
2.30 to 2.45	Break
2.45 to 3.45 pm	Speaker: C. Kenneth Waters (University of Calgary) “Scientific Metaphysics of Hierarchy” Commentator: Ingo Brigandt (University of Alberta) Chair: Michael Raven (University of Victoria)
5.30 to 7.30	Dinner

ABSTRACTS

**Nancy Bauer
(Tufts)**



“Trans Women Are Women: Full-Stop”

Trans women are women. Some people—for example, a certain group of (mostly British) cis women who call themselves "gender-critical" feminists--deny this fact and claim that people calling themselves trans women are men. I argue, in tension with feminist arguments based on conceptual analysis, that no attempt to analyze gender or gender concepts will change either the fact that some women are transwomen or the closed minds of people who are keen to waste time denying this fact on putative philosophical grounds. I further argue that people, including feminists, who deny for any reason that trans women are women are putting trans women in harm's way and thus revealing the fundamentally *ethical* (rather than metaphysical) nature of the "debate." Finally, I criticize people who think that "reasonable people" can disagree about whether trans women are women and argue that people who denounce "gender-critical" feminists are in no way violating free-speech norms. Whether or not these people are themselves closet anti-trans people, they are, I argue, both harming trans people and barking up the wrong philosophical tree.

Kristina Gehrman
(University of Tennessee, Knoxville)



“Generics and Character-Based Evaluation”

This paper concerns the relationship between a certain kind of evaluative or normative inference, and generic sentences such as *Dogs have four legs*, *Mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus*, and *Stoves are hot*. Such generics play an essential role in a very basic kind of evaluative or normative reasoning. But generics cannot play the role that they in fact have in evaluative reasoning, if they are construed as generalizations, in the way that many theories of generics propose to do. Therefore, I argue, generics cannot be understood as generalizations; instead, they are irreducible *qualitative characterizations* of kinds. As such they are not susceptible to the currently-orthodox quantificational semantic analysis involving the unexpressed operator *Gen*. On the qualitative characterization view, a generic is true if and only if it predicates something of a kind that is truly characteristic of that kind. The concept of a kind-characteristic is distinct from the canonical (especially, Aristotelian) conception of an essence chiefly in that it is not immutable, but also because kinds may, in Wittgenstein’s phrase, have “blurred edges”. The view that generics are qualitative characterizations of kinds suggests a helpful way of thinking about some of the puzzling questions posed by generics’ odd logical properties.

Christian Kanzian
(University of Innsbruck)



“The Essence of Artifacts”

In my talk I will argue for an essentialist account of artifacts. Working within the framework of a hylomorphic theory of individual objects, I defend an “intention-based view” of artificial essences, which aims at a liberal yet nevertheless theoretically useful concept of artifacts. By “liberal” I mean that our concept of artifacts should not only cover technical products like tools, but also artworks and social artifacts, like institutions; by “theoretically fruitful” I mean that our theory should allow artifacts to be integrated into a reasonable categorical framework that enables us, against current counter-arguments, to defend their status as intention-dependent entities. To achieve these aims I propose giving up a simple author-intention-based view, and adopting an essentialism with conventionalist elements.

Ka Ho Lam
(University of Alberta)



“The Realism of Taxonomic Pluralism”

I present a critique of taxonomic pluralism, namely the view that there are multiple correct ways to classify entities into natural kinds within a given scientific domain. I argue that taxonomic pluralism, as an anti-essentialist position, fails to provide a *realist* alternative to taxonomic monism, i.e., the view that there is only one correct way to classify entities into natural kinds within a given scientific domain. To establish my argument, I first explain why the naturalist approach to natural kinds adopted by pluralists requires them to give up the mind-independence criterion of reality presupposed by monists. Next, I survey two types of pluralist account. I argue that, while the modest pluralist account is not pluralistic enough, the radical pluralist account fails to come up with an alternative criterion of reality that is robust enough to differentiate its position from anti-realism about natural kinds. I conclude by drawing out the implications of my critique for the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate about natural kinds.

Theodore Locke
(Concordia University Montréal)



“Metaphysical Explanations for Modal Normativists”

I expand *modal normativism*, a theory of metaphysical modality, to give an account of *metaphysical explanations*, claims seemingly about real definitions and real grounding relations. According to modal normativism, basic modal claims do not have a descriptive function, but instead they have the normative function of enabling language users to express constitutive rules that govern the use of ordinary non-modal vocabulary. However, a worry for modal normativism is that it doesn't keep up with all of the interesting metaphysics involving claims about essences and grounding. So, I advance modal normativism by arguing that claims seemingly about real definitions and real grounding relations just are stricter object-language expressions of the features of semantic constitutive rules that bear on the competent use of language but are not adequately conveyed using basic modal vocabulary. A major payoff of my normativist account of metaphysical explanations is that it yields a plausible story about how we come to evaluate and know metaphysical explanations—we do this primarily by conceptual analysis.

Anna Marmodoro
(Durham)



“Instantiating Structure versus Essence”

Is this object *circular gold*, or a *golden circle*? Plato thought the former; Aristotle the latter. What is the ontological difference between the two? (Hint: it’s not their function.) In this paper I investigate the *ontological status* and *role* of *structure* and *essence* in objects, comparatively in three metaphysical systems bequeathed to us from antiquity: those of Anaxagoras, Plato and Aristotle. I examine alternative models of *instantiation* of structure and essence in their respective *individuation* accounts of objects.

Christof Rapp
(LMU Munich)



“Essentialism in Aristotle’s *Categories*: Some Queries and Suggestions”

Aristotle is regarded as the essentialist par excellence. Still, there is no comprehensive treatise or particular chapter in his oeuvre that would present a coherent account, let alone defence, of Aristotle’s essentialism. When Book VII of his *Metaphysics* starts unfolding the notion of essence, it keeps referring to regimentations that apparently derive from the writings collected under the heading *Organon*. This is of particular interest, because the writings of the *Organon* do not engage with hylomorphism, while the essentialism of the *Metaphysics* culminates in the claim that forms are the essences of all things. Thus, the sortal essentialism in the writings of the *Organon* seems to be distinct from the *Metaphysics*’ views about essential forms, but still plays a role in framing and preparing the latter theory. Against this background, the paper will look into the essentialism of the two presumably early and closely connected treatises *Categories* and *Topics*.

**Mark Richard
(Harvard)**



“Is Reference Essential to Meaning?”

We conceptualize meaning in an essentialist way. We are taught that there is a sense (property, intension) which is the meaning of 'dog', and nothing could have the meaning of 'dog' unless *that* was its meaning. Even those who don't reify meanings are usually meaning-essentialists. Someone who tells you that a word can't mean what 'and' means unless it's governed by a version of 'and'-elimination is a meaning essentialist about 'and'.

Less is essential to a word's meaning than is commonly thought. Meaning is determined by various processes; examples are speakers' lifelong accumulation and analysis of examples of phrase use; their ongoing tracking of the presuppositions others make when using a phrase. The idea that there's such a thing as "the" meaning of a phrase is an abstraction from something essentially dynamic, like the evolving genealogical lineages we call species. While this picture of meaning doesn't require that meanings have no interesting semantic properties essentially, it suggests that far less is essential to meaning than we've been taught.

Katherine Ritchie
(CUNY Graduate and City University of New York)



“Essentializing Language and the Prospects for Ameliorative Projects”

Some language encourages essentialist thinking. For instance, generics promote the view that kinds share persistent and explanatory underlying features. Essentializing language goes beyond generics. There is evidence that nouns quite generally promote essentializing. To justify the view I consider predicate nominals (e.g., ‘is a female’) and predicate adjectives (e.g., ‘is female’). I show that predicate nominals elicit essentializing inferential judgments, while their adjectival correlates do not. I then argue that our propensity to essentialize when nouns are used reveals a limitation for ameliorative projects—undertakings in conceptual engineering aimed at revising our conceptual and linguistic resources. Ameliorated nouns (and their conceptual correlates) can continue to underpin essentializing inferences. Given the way language and cognition function, ameliorative projects can fail to meet core social and political ends in virtue of failing to consider the vehicles of representation.

C. Kenneth Waters
(University of Calgary)



“Scientific Metaphysics of Hierarchy”

Scientists and philosophers generally assume that the world is structured in levels, organized in hierarchical fashion. This idea is exemplified in the biological sciences where systems are understood to be organized into levels, for example into the levels of macromolecules, cells, multicellular organisms, populations, and communities. But the biological world is structured by a multiplicity of hierarchies in addition to the one mentioned here. For example, the hierarchy of taxonomic levels and the hierarchy of trophic levels. I will begin my talk by introducing a pragmatic conception of scientific metaphysics, which will motivate the idea that biological sciences should be at the center of metaphysicians’ attention. I will analyze the idea of hierarchical levels in the context of biological sciences. I will use this analysis to argue against the common assumption that there is a grand, hierarchical organization of nature. The world has lots of hierarchical structures, but no overall hierarchical structure.

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Getting There



[Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity](#) is located in [Banff National Park](#), a [UNESCO World Heritage](#) site.

From Calgary:

By airport shuttle:

There are two main companies which will bring you directly from the Calgary International Airport to the Town of Banff (our base camp), you can check out the prices, schedules and book your ticket at the links here:

[Banff Airporter](#)

[Brewster Banff Airport Express](#)

By driving:

It takes approximately 90 minutes to drive from Calgary International Airport to Banff (145 km, 90 mi). Directions and information about parking at the Banff Centre can be found [here](#).

Check-in is at the [Professional Development Centre](#) (see the [map](#) on the next page).

Map of Banff Centre

