**An Approach to the Existence and Persistence of Social Kinds**

**Abstract**

In this paper I outline a theory of social kinds.A general theory of social kinds has to set out at least three conditions: existence conditions, persistence conditions, and identity conditions. For the sake of expediency, I focus on the existence and persistence conditions. The paper is organized just as life: first with existence, then persistence. I argue that anti-realism is more attractive than realism as an account of the existence conditions, despite the fact that realism has been underappreciated. Then I argue for a particular theory of the persistence conditions, which I call the basic overlapping traits theory (BOTT), responding to objections along the way. The upshot of the argument is that from an anti-realist metaphysics we have a capacity to discuss a wider diversity of social phenomena, and leave it to social science to figure out which have explanatory centrality.

**Keywords**

Personal identity, social ontology, pluralism, social metaphysics

1. **Introduction**

We make diverse claims about social kinds. We talk about nation-states, communities, social networks, social movements, cultures, ethnicities, dyads, institutions, firms, systems, coalitions, mobs, crowds, demographics, and a litany of other groupings of people with some kind of solidarity. But in the history of social theory, it has never been made decisively clear which of these options are genuine objects of a social science, though many perspectives have been put forward (Durkheim, 1997; Simmel, 1950; Weber, 1978; Porpora, 1989). Some progress has been made over the past thirty years owing in part from renewed philosophical interest in social metaphysics (Searle, 2010; Tuomela, 2003; Gilbert, 2003; Thomasson, 2016; Epstein, 2015).

A theory of the metaphysics of social kinds has to set out at least three conditions: its existence conditions, persistence conditions, and identification conditions. That is to say, when we speak of social types of things (whether as collectives, pluralities, sets, groups, and so on), we have to be prepared to explain in what sense that a social kind (a) *really exists* at all; (b) how it possesses a pattern of features that persist across time; and (c) whose features are distinctive enough to allow the group to be numerically counted.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this paper I propose answers to existence and persistence conditions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In much of the discussion of social ontology, the question of mind-independence of social kinds is not taken seriously; it is broadly assumed that it is best understood as a function of collective intentionality. To approach things in this way is to avoid some vital questions in metaphysics which deserve some serious treatment. With that in mind, there are three potential positions one might take towards existence conditions of social kinds -- one may be a realist, a quasi-realist, or a critical anti-realist. The matter at hand is whether, and to what extent, social kinds are grounded in mind-independent facts in the world: realism says they fully are, quasi-realists say they partly are, and critical anti-realists say they need not be. I argue that realism is unattractive despite its merits, while anti-realism and quasi-realism are both viable options.

There are diverse stances one might take to the persistence conditions of a social kind. One may view social kinds as organizations, as interpersonal interactions, or as populations in a niche. Based on an analogy to an approach to personhood, I argue for a particular theory of the persistence conditions, which I call the basic overlapping traits theory (BOTT). BOTT allows us to recognize a wide variety of social kinds.

The existence, persistence, and identity conditions are separate metaphysical claims that make distinct theoretical commitments. However, they are also interconnected claims. After surveying broad approaches to both of these criteria, I show that different theories about the existence conditions of social kinds will output different views on what social kinds exist.

In what follows, I will be assuming a few metaphysical theses that I hope are not especially controversial. First, that to say a fact is substantially true, is to lay a claim that purports to have staying power. Second, that there is a distinction between a discussion of basic social kinds and superordinate and subordinate social kinds. A superordinate social kind is a layer of social reality that is grounded in social kinds. A subordinate social kind is a kind that can only arise once some particular or unique felicity conditions obtain: e.g., the team requires a coach to draw up a sign-up sheet, for players to join, etc. My interest is in making sense of basic social kinds, i.e., any particular group you can think of ‘*qua’* (or *insofar as* *it is*) a social kind.

1. **Argument**
   1. **Existence**

*What are social kinds*, such that we can say that they really exist? We ask this question, not in an effort to isolate just one social kind (e.g., the academic senate, the newspaper, the corporation), but to make sense of the coherent basis for the whole category, including its peripheral or borderline cases.

You can approach the issue in at least two plausible ways (quasi-realism and critical anti-realism), and one implausible way (realism). For the purposes of this discussion, to be a *realist* in the metaphysical sense is to hold that objects exist independently of the minds of the individual observers, while anti-realists are those who deny the mind-independence thesis. The discussion of realism will explore, in some detail, a view that social kinds involve the distributed expression of biopower. The length of the discussion is necessary to demonstrate to the reader that there are some genuinely interesting and compelling features to the account. Even though it is ultimately unattractive, I think we can learn from it.

*Anti-realists* come in at least two varieties. *Critical* *anti-realists* are those who deny mind-independence while still wanting to preserve ways of speaking truthfully about social kinds; I associate them with critical theories. *Quasi-realists* are those that agree that social kinds are partly grounded on individual attitudes, but also partly based on facts that have nothing to do with individual minds.

**Realism**. The *realist* position says that we can talk truthfully about collectives or social kinds just in case they are in some sense independent of individual minds.[[3]](#footnote-3) That is to say, social systems do not necessarily have the feature of collective intentionality, owing to the fact that they are partly grounded in facts that have little to do with the contributions of individual minds: that is, the acts, attitudes, and behaviors of sentient creatures. The acts and behaviors of the collective whole could then be regarded as ontologically objective, or mind-independent.

To understand this view, consider the following analogy to cell biology and the study of the human body. Non-experts are frequently tempted to say that the human body is made up of cells. However, as a matter of fact, only a small minority of the substance that makes up the adult human body is made up of cells. For instance, our bones are not made of cells, and they make up a substantial portion of the body. So, any attempt at fully grounding somatic facts in cell biology would be misconceived. Similarly, one might say, social systems are only partly grounded in individual intentionality. For example, Starbucks is not made up of only the people who work in it, but also the store locations, the coffee beans, supply chains, and so on. (Epstein, 2015)

The trouble is with making sense of the idea that groups can engage in actions, or have intentions, without also claiming that they are at least partly dependent on the attitudes of individual persons (typically, members). It is a commonplace that social kinds are intensionally interactive, or self-fulfilling prophecies, where the ways in which a group are represented play a role in establishing the persistence and identity of the group itself. Granted, this characterization may be overblown, just as it is easy to exaggerate the role of cell biology in the study of the human body -- ‘Canada’, for example, is a social kind, and partly constituted by certain anthropological facts, but also some purely terrestrial facts about the land mass. But it would be equally absurd to say that Canada is independent of individual minds. Were it not for a certain political history, and for the continuing attitudes of human beings, it would neither exist nor persist.

Here is a rebuttal on behalf of the realist, to show that group behavior has nothing to do with individual mental states. Suppose we believe that mental states involve qualia; if so, it follows that philosophical zombies have no individual intentionality. Still, the realist may say, these zombies may exist in social relationships which could be analyzed just as we do now. Hence, groups behaviors are independent of the mind. To be fair, I think that argument is interesting. However, it shows nothing. An identity-functionalist view of the mind seems to be best placed as our default view of the nature of the mind in the actual world (Lewis, 1980). The logical possibility of philosophical zombies makes no difference to the serious study of reality, i.e., metaphysics.

Here is a more plausible rebuttal. One might argue that the existence of groups has only a *coincidental* relationship with human intentionality – that group behavior is settled by individual behaviors, which are only contingently explained by individual attitudes. The study of societies would involve the study of the ways that the behavior of populations (or the ways bodies move in spaces) affects more of the same. That is not to deny that mental states exist; it is only to say that facts about social kinds are fully grounded in facts about bodies, behaviors, and rules of interaction. Individual attitudes could sometimes be a part of the explanation of how social kinds behave, but they would be treated as exogenous features of the context that moderate group behavior. In short: social kinds are best understood in terms of *biopower*. (Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, 1977; Foucault, Power/Knowledge, 1980)

Here is an illustration that might help to motivate the bodies-in-spaces model that underlies realism. Imagine a peninsula on the ocean that is near a busy port city, and imagine that there is a set of reefs near the shoreline that regularly causes boats to crash. Suppose, also, that the tidal currents and the geography of the island are settled in such a way that survivors and debris naturally end up in a particular grotto. The grotto, having suffered many incidences of this kind in the past, has plentiful resources – enough to help the survivors get back on their feet. We may refer to these people as a group: *the grotto survivors*. Indeed, we may refer to them truthfully as a group even when discussing many ships crashing against the same shores over centuries, and without ever needing to ask the individual members whether they identified with the label, ‘the grotto survivors’. When it comes to whether or not they are part of this group, their attitudes are, in a sense, besides the point. The fact of solidarity emerged from the needs of the situation, was a function of the cloistering and clustering bodies in a common space, and did not depend on individual attitudes. The group exists because certain conditions were satisfied by the natural facts of the situation.

This strikes me as a potentially compelling example of the bodies-in-spaces picture of social kinds. Yet the counterargument is even more compelling: for the fact is, *we --* the philosophical observers *--* are the ones who are applying our individual attitudes to frame the facts in that way. The group, ‘the grotto survivors’, do not exist ‘independent of the mind’ -- they are independent of *the members’* minds, at best. To say that it would nevertheless be a social group without even our labelling it as such would be to beg the question, since this is precisely the thing that anti-realists find unintuitive.

Let’s suppose that the realist had a successful rejoinder. Perhaps, for instance, the realist might insist that the facts about the existence of the group only need to fit a logical form: i.e., *that some sequence of events (e) happened that satisfy the initiation conditions (c) for that sort of group (K) to come into existence*.[[4]](#footnote-4) The realist could, perhaps, argue that the facts that account for these initiation conditions – e.g., some individual intentions and attitudes -- are deliberately unspecified. i.e., perhaps the existence of the group is grounded in the facts of whether the initiation conditions are met, and (perhaps, for some reason) this does not require us to ask about what facts anchor those grounding conditions as part of our metaphysics. I am not tempted to steelman the details of this account, since it runs against the boundaries of my theoretical imagination. So, for the sake of argument, let’s just pretend some enterprising realist can, and does, have some sort of rationale for pursuing this line of argument.

One might still ask: does this account generalize? For example, suppose we tried to think about legal systems in terms that metaphysical realists would find palatable. Indeed, some have; e.g., (Brownsword, 2015).[[5]](#footnote-5) If we were persuaded of this view, then it would follow that paradigm cases of social kinds could dispense with any need to explain its laws in terms of the internal point of view. The facts about the social kind, as well as the existence of the social kind, would be irretrievably outside of any individual attitudes and creative actions. A system of law would be a complex system of bodies in spaces.

If this were the correct metaphysics, we have to ask what good it is doing for us. That is, if it were the right way of speaking, then it is worth asking whether we are placed in a position of unnecessary and extravagant epistemic risk when we try to explain the characteristics of legal systems and the laws they create. Ontology is, after all, an activity deeply related to the epistemological project of managing our default sense of the best explanation – so, for example, we deny that witches are part of our ontology because, among other things, admitting the existence of witches puts us in a worse position to get to the best explanation when we are confronted with a strange phenomenon.[[6]](#footnote-6) And it is not clear to me how we are put at decreased epistemic risk when we assert that group activity is not even partly grounded in individual attitudes, especially when some of those attitudes always seem to be such a conspicuous part of the explanation of how bodies move and behave.

Suppose, as seems plausible, that whatever ontology we have for social kinds will have to be shared by the social facts that issue from that kind. It is important that we should be able to distinguish between intensional facts with a common referent that issue from the existence of a social kind -- e.g., the difference between the President and the Commander-in-Chief (where the social kind is ‘the American government’). One way to block this inference straight-out is to say that the two roles have two separate sorts of consequences: one that is (roughly) a feature of domestic administration, and another which commands the armed services. But saying that these are two different sets of consequences is begging the question against the behavioral realist’s approach, for it assumes that the two roles have different consequences, which is a fact they would wish to deny. The realist would prefer to say that the two roles are always occupied by the very same person, and that any acts performed by the member of the one office necessarily affects the acts done by the member of the other office, since both are part of the same embodied-behavioral system. Be that as it may, certain kinds of consequences are more salient in their connection to one role than the other (i.e., consequences related to the administration of executive functions vs. consequences related to the administration of the armed services), and we are at greater risk of committing errors in explanation when we fail to attend to the inferences that are salient to inquiry.

In short, realism forces us to stop caring about things that we need in order to explain things as best we can. It contains valuable insights, but does not seem like an approach to social metaphysics that can cover the rich variety of plausible cases.

**Anti-realism***. The critical anti-realist* position says we can talk truthfully about plural entities (“We-” ascriptions) while abandoning any pretense to mind-independence just in case we say that the truths involved in generating social kinds are grounded in norms of justification, not reality. The critical anti-realist says that we can assert and believe in social kinds so long as we can also say the individual who asserts something about group behavior is doing so *unpretentiously*; i.e., just in case they are justifiably and acceptably speaking for plural entities of the relevant kind. Without some kind of criterion for social action, we end up with speech that is essentially pretentious: e.g., if some rube says “Canadians enjoyed the frigid weather today” without any evidence of bodies moving outdoors or some prior assumption that Canadians enjoy being frostbitten, they are speaking without justification. On this view, the truth of any We-statement is normatively derived from some convictions about what we ought to say, given who ‘we’ are.[[7]](#footnote-7) I take it that Richard Rorty defended something this view, since he endorsed a version of ethnocentrism whose sense of truth is treated as a term of approbation (Rorty, 1993).

The *quasi-realist* view would try to repatriate the “mind-independence” criterion in diluted form. Clearly, collectives aren’t independent of *all* minds, and in that respect, they are unlike moons, atoms, and so on. Still, there might be some attenuated ways that we could talk about collectives being partly grounded in mind-independent facts. (a) One is to say that social groups exist *independent of some (individual) minds* and not others, e.g., leaders. (b) Another is to say that the existence of collectives is grounded in facts that are independent of some *part of our minds*, e.g., exerting an influence that is independent of any particular person’s will. (c) Yet another is to focus on the apparent fact that persistence conditions do not themselves require reference to intentionality, but only to initiation and elimination conditions, which themselves may or may not involve reference to intentionality (Epstein, 2015, pp. 182-196). The first theory is what we might call the ‘executive theory’; the second, the ‘dissolution theory’; the third, the ‘anchor theory’.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the executive theory, organizational or institutional centrality is vital in a manner that is reminiscent of the harshest versions of positivism (Austin, 1875). Meanwhile, in the dissolution theory, that centrality is fully excluded as a criterion. This theory, or some generalization of it, could be thought of as the historian’s approach to social kinds. The third is the logician’s approach.

Both anti-realism and quasi-realism are plausible accounts of the existence of social kinds. However, each approach has its perks and downsides. We return to this point in (2.3), where we shall see how the existence and persistence conditions interact.

* 1. **Persistence**

To speak of the persistence of something, we first have to have settled views on whether or not it exists in the first place. So, for the sake of argument, let’s assume for the purposes of this section that the anti-realist version of existence conditions has won out. We are then in a position to ask under what conditions the phenomenon persists across different stages (time-slices). Before I discuss the theory of how collectives endure (2.2.2), I have to say something about how individuals persist, because the latter is based on a slightly eccentric view of the former.

* + 1. **Basic overlapping traits theory (BOTT)**

The existence conditions of personhood can be satisfied with the following platitudes: a person exists just in case there is an agent (i.e., capable of at least *de re* intentions), and that agent is capable of taking responsibility for their actions and environment. We are nevertheless left with the question of how persons *persist*.

A few centuries of thinking about personal identity seem to have taught us to be wary of simple theories. It seems now that the persistence conditions of a person are a *syndrome*, not a classic concept with tight-and-tidy boundaries and parsimonious necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead, the concept of these survival conditions has a disjunctive logical form.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Here is the theory, which I call the ‘basic overlapping traits’ theory (BOTT). For a person to persist, it must be an entity that enjoys *at least two out of three* basic qualities. The basic qualities can be found in the literature (Olson, 2021):

* *Psychological continuity* – a person persists just in case they share certainly broad mental features (i.e., memories, plans, beliefs) with those they had in the past. (Locke, 1836; Parfit, 1971)
* *Somatic continuity* – a person persists just in case they possess a living body in the present that is continuous with the one they had in the past. (Baker, 2000)
* *Fitness* *to* *niche* – a person persists just in case they fit into their environment as they had in the past. e.g., habits and ways of belonging and adapting to the environment to which they are accustomed. (Millgram, 2015)

More precisely, the theory holds that:

*BOTT*: Necessarily, (a at t) persists as (a\* at t\*) iff:

(a at t) and (a\* at t\*) both satisfy Q, where

Q = [For all x, {(Bx & Px) or (Px & Nx) or (Bx & Nx) or (Bx & Px & Nx)}].

Where the necessary and sufficient conditions for person (a) at time (t) persisting as (a\*) at (t\*) is that they satisfy a single criterion Q, and where Q is a relatively short disjunction made up of the above-mentioned sub-criteria. In this way, the structure of Q and its constituents is analogous to JL Mackie’s INUS conditions as an account of causation, where each of the basic qualities (e.g., Bx, Nx, Px) is conceived of as *insufficiently necessary parts of an unnecessary but sufficient condition* (e.g., Bx & Px). (Mackie, 1980) However, Q’s role is necessary in its role in setting out the conditions for persistence in light of the BOTT; one might then conceive of the whole disjunct, Q, as a necessary and sufficient condition comprised of insufficiently necessary parts arranged in an a disjunct of unnecessary but sufficient conditions (NSINUS).

The result is that, for any person, their survival or persistence can be grounded in at least four equally valid sets of facts: as a full person, a segmented person, a classical person, and a role person (Fig 1). The full person satisfies all the criteria; the classic person satisfies both the somatic and psychological conditions; the segmented person satisfies only the conditions of fitness to niche and somatic continuity; and the role person satisfies only the psychological and fitness criteria.[[10]](#footnote-10)

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Fig 1. Continuity* | | | *Depiction of persons* |
| *Somatic* | *Psychological* | *Niche fit* |
| Yes | Yes | Yes | Full |
| Yes | No | Yes | Segmented |
| Yes | Yes | No | Classical |
| No | Yes | Yes | Role |

As its point of departure, the basic overlapping traits theory acknowledges the failure of the constituent conditions to provide a reasonable account of personal survival considered in isolation. The past century of philosophy has gotten us to the point where simple theories have lost their appeal. Various thought-experiments have revealed the essentially ambiguous state of our intuitions about what counts as personal survival: the prince and the cobbler (classical agency), *Star Trek* teleporters, and *Swamp Thing* (role agency), and *Memento* (segmented agency) have radically enlarged our imagination to a point where intuitions about the persistence of the person can be thought possible even in highly unlikely situations. While in the modernist period we had assumed something like the classical or full person, we are now familiar with other potential forms of resilience.

The addition of ‘fitness to niche’ is a novelty, and requires some reason for being added here. The first reason why it is added is that personal narrative does seem to play an important role in our ascriptions of a person persisting across time. However, disappointingly, narrativist accounts of persistence have been based only on the motivations found in first-person experience, or from the psychological point of view (Schroer, J. W. and R. Schroer, 2014). In this sense, one may see them as little more than a friendly amendment to the psychological view. Yet, in fact, narratives can have a force all their own, e.g., in the form of stereotypes and prejudices that operate independently from the first-person point of view.[[11]](#footnote-11) That is to say, a person may fit in their social niche in wildly different ways as their life goes on, and not even be aware of the drastic and even catastrophic influence that changes to their fitness to niche have on who they are, as observed from a reasonably sympathetic third-person perspective. So, the notion of adaptation to a niche seems to be available as a general articulation of the importance of narrative, and is a core part of one recent plausible defense of what he calls the “segmented agent”. (Millgram, 2015)

Still, one might ask: why at least *two* criteria which overlap? Because it will not suffice for us to select a single criterion and hold to it with no independent means of calibrating the expressions to be identified – not if the hope is to have stable categories that play a proper role in the production of true beliefs, anyway. If personhood were a decidedly realist sort of thing, occurring out there independently of the mind, then perhaps the need for multiple criteria would not be necessary; all we would need to do is refer to bio-essentialist facts, say. But since personal survival *can be* in some sense dependent on the mind, we cannot be so glib.

A reasonable objection to BOTT is based on body-swap cases. According to the BOTT, ‘Freaky Friday’ type situations – where one mind is transferred into another body, and vice-versa -- do not involve the preservation of personhood. For if they did, then it would mean the psychological condition was sufficient for agency. Yet many would intuitively say that the whole point of such stories is that one person persists, albeit in the body of another, and use that as reason to doubt the theory. In reply, I think this view inherits its intuitions in a dualist conception of mind, and I think this conception of mind is untenable despite its intuitiveness. Some physicalistically weighted version of identity functionalism seems preferable; and on this view, an actual (hence, metaphysically interesting) attempt at a Freaky Friday experiment (on adults) would involve an invasive medical experiment that would require comprehensive neural rewiring, likely resulting in brain death. If intuitions tell us otherwise, that is only tells us that they are often unrealistic and uninformative.

One might also wonder if BOTT leaves the possibility of personal autonomy out of the picture. Indeed, I assume that the joint continuity of psychological and somatic features is what makes us autonomous in the classical sense of ‘self-rule’. From a classical point of view, the role and segmented person are presumably heteronymous – it is unlikely that the segmented person would enjoy the kind of consistency of conviction are needed to be characterized in terms of the Kantian good will, for example. Even so, they are persons all the same.

* + 1. **Collectivized BOTT**

I would like to say that the persistence of collectives can be understood in a similar way. However, the persistence conditions for individual personhood only bear an analogous relationship with the persistence conditions of collectives, owing to differences in their nature.

The main thing to focus on, that differentiates individuals from collectives, is that individuals possess embodied intentionality, while collectives are formed out of solidarity between such bodies. These are different sorts of entities or designs. So, we must supplement and clarify that our concern with continuity, in the study of social units, has got to do with the factors that make *solidarity* continuous for the plurality in question. Solidarity, in the current sense, involves the persistence of meaningful trust-relationships for a group of persons.

That said, the approach to characterizing groups is something quite like the one we used to characterize individual persons, with two out of three criteria demanded.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The basic criteria are as follows:

* *Proximity*: Since groups are not a single organism, we cannot speak of somatic continuity. Instead, we may now refer to a *shared physical space* of members.
* *Organizational centrality*: Although collectives may have some of emergent mental states (collective intentionality), the locus of interest in mainly in whether a group is capable of planning. So, instead of psychological continuity, we might refer to *organizational centrality*, understood as judgment aggregation where people occupy relatively stable roles in deliberating and forming plans in light of a world full of risk.
* *Fitness to niche:* occurs as it did with the characterization of individual persons.

All of these criteria share the fact that they inevitably function as a source of information that guides expectations for other people, and in ways that helps set a standard of normalcy that allows people to decide when they want to take a risk on acting on unknowns. That is to say, they are sources of trust-relationships, and hence solidarity.

Hence, the basic conditions involve the physical, organizational, and niche aspects of a given social unit, resulting in different renderings, per Fig (2): the view of a group as a total system (all three criteria), as a cluster of behaviors (proximate in niche), as a locus of power over bodies (proximate organization), or as a tendency of associations (organization in a niche).[[13]](#footnote-13) For a group to lack any of these criteria is to have its members possess traits that are variable in the relevant respect.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Solidarity (Fig. 2)* | | | *Depiction of social kinds* |
| *Proximity of*  *place* | *Organizational*  *centrality* | *Niche fit* |
| Yes | Yes | Yes | Total systems  *(e.g., a modern nation-state)* |
| Yes | No | Yes | Behavioral clusters  *(e.g., a crowd)* |
| Yes | Yes | No | Emergent cells  *(e.g., an ad hoc group)* |
| No | Yes | Yes | Tendencies of firms  *(e.g., a network)* |

The collectivized BOT theory is metaphysically modest, and consistent with a plurality of potential views on various social kinds. Each rendering is directed towards a certain specialized form of coordinated action, with its own style of persuasive effects on individuals, and which prudentially compel them to play their respective parts in some fashion. However, the exact form of their prudential liabilities and entitlements may or may not involve deep normative commitments reflective of absolute moral (or even all-other-things-equal) rights corresponding to duties. To be sure, such deontic powers are very clear in total systems and in institutions based on proximal organization. But there need not be any rights coordinated with duties in a movement, culture, or network – there might only be duties without rights, for instance, or vice-versa. The extra prudential pressure there is to coordinate with one’s fellows is contextual, owing to conditions of risk when thinking about going it alone.

One might ask: what is so important about *these* features, of proximity, organization, and fitness to niche? One might easily construct another kind of taxonomy along very different lines. For instance, Katherine Ritchie distinguishes between two kinds of social groups, which she calls “type 1” and “type 2” groups, evaluated according to four salient criteria: *structural-functional organization, collective intentionality, member volition, and shared features*. (Ritchie, 2015) “Type 1” groups are those Gilbert-style groups (“teams, committees, clubs, and courts”) that have shared organizational features, collective intentionality, member volition, and a lack of shared features, while “Type 2” groups have the reverse features (race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation). Needless to say, organization is a criterion that Ritchie’s model and mine both possess. Ritchie is ambivalent towards the role of member volition, or at least regards it as problematic to say that membership in ethnicity, sex, and gender are simply involuntary; and I think the same problem can be raised for her characterization of Type 1 groups, since some -- e.g., cults – persist whether or not its members have any choice in the matter. The role of collective intentionality indicates a difference in our projects: I am less interested in explaining collective action or agency, and more interested in discussing plural entities *per se*. And the question of shared features is simply a generic way of talking about ways of fitting one’s niche and/or the local behaviors of bodies.

It is worth asking how BOTT makes any sense of ‘Type 2’ categories (e.g., gender, race) as social kinds *per se*. They do not, after all, have any obvious role in the BOT theory. I think it is reasonable to say that demographic categories *are* a social kind, in the sense that certain mechanisms of political economy can be used to make sense of the underlying solidarity, and those causes rely on explanations regarding the persistence of networks, institutions, the tendencies of firms, and full systems – typically, and most markedly, facts related to relative deprivations or privileges, powers and liabilities.[[14]](#footnote-14) For lack of a better phrase, we can think of ‘Type 2’ demographics as *superordinate* social kinds, in that the social facts surrounding them are explained by the social facts of the social kinds in which they are grounded, and which inherit a sense of solidarity in that way.

Some of these depictions are more mainstream than others. There is no hesitation to say that the monopolistic nation-state is a basic unit of analysis (e.g., in Rawls), and other social ontologists some enjoy the study of *ad hoc* groups or institutions with clear normative powers as exemplars (Gilbert, 2003; Searle, 2010). It is less often heard in philosophy that collective existence could be ascribed to decentralized movements or networks that have fuzzy or uncoordinated normative powers. However, these points are a holdover from a certain tacit individualism about grounding, which we are just now starting to reconsider. (Epstein, 2015)

As before, the hardest criterion to characterize is the idea of ‘fitness to niche’. By this, I mean the idea that a social unit is in some way crucially or vitally connected to the ways they ‘fit’ into their environment, including in the ways that they are perceived. So, for instance, a pair of people on a walk together (using Gilbert’s canonical example) do not need to raise a banner and trumpet their intentions to go on a walk together to qualify as engaged in a joint action; they only need to go on the walk and be appropriately responsive to coordinated reasons. But there is a sense in which a movement or a network has to characterize itself in terms of the ways it adapts to the world in order for anyone to be able to account for its character.

Also, as before, a reasonable objection to the collectivized BOTT is based on organizational centrality. According to the theory, cases where an organization persists, but where that organization fails to fit its niche, and where its constituent members are physically dislocated, shall not be sufficient to survive. Imagine a government of a country is unlawfully deposed and replaced by another regime, and in this respect no longer fits its niche. Suppose that the government-in-exile retained its organizational structure (being able to communicate through secret channels), though its members were scattered to the winds. BOTT says that, unfortunately, the government-in-exile has not persisted as a government at all. If the cabinet does persist as a social kind, it is only as a social kind that is characterized by fitting into its environment in a very different sense than it had prior to exile.

The idea of solidarity, or maintenance of trust-relationships, is at the core of the account. That sort of solidarity might be found in aggregates. Consider the Occupy Movement, for example. Clearly, Zuccotti Park did not occupy itself; nor did Oakland; and it was no coincidence that the two were occupied around the same time. Of course, we can say that this owes to coordinated action between two distinct social units or kinds. But this does not preclude the possibility of speaking of a greater or superordinate collective force that operated over those two places, given that a sense of solidarity unifies them, and can be presumably spelled out by a combination of networking (organizers), the emergence of *ad hoc* cells (working groups), and behavioral clusters (the spread among the wider population).

Given that BOTT is so ecumenical, one might then wonder if anything at all that is potentially of interest to the social sciences is excluded by the account. I think that the connection between certain sorts of aggregate behavior will only connect very thinly to explanations based on social kinds. So, e.g., when we say “the market rallied behind Apple today,” we are speaking of an emergent phenomenon that is in some sense based on social kinds (e.g., networks, understood as reliable information chains). Yet this might not be a collective phenomenon, if (when we appeal to the techniques of political economy) it becomes clear that the underlying social kinds do not produce this result as a function of trust-relationships, and hence solidarity. At any rate, that is how the explanation of market behavior would go, on the (fictitious) assumption that individual actors in the market are based on self-interest. And in that case, there would be no need to call it an act that issues from a social kind.[[15]](#footnote-15)

* 1. **Social kinds, existence, and persistence**

The two criteria, existence and persistence, are deeply intertwined. This should be made clear through an examination of the ways that the three approaches to the existence of social kinds are affected by the collectivized BOTT.

**Realism**. Our feeling that there are, or must be, mind-independent forces in the world is bolstered in part by the ambition to arrive at a grand unified theory that provides unique and coherent right answers to all the questions we might ask. The best account of metaphysically realist approach to social kinds would do honor to that desire for unity by focusing, roughly, on biopower – the command of bodies in spaces. On such a theory, the role of meaning and intentionality is treated as an incidental side-constraint on the existence of social kinds. In doing so, it eliminates one of the major obstacles to unification, which is that diverse perspectives one may take on social affairs have direct consequences on their subject matter, so would introduce an essentially fragmented account.

Arguably, the realist theory is technically compatible with BOTT. There is nothing to the idea of an ‘organization’, for instance, that requires us to take special notice of meaning or content, so long as the very idea of an organization implies behaviors that follow a logical description. (e.g., x tells y to z, y reliably does z, therefore x is placed higher on the organizational chart than y.) Intentionality is not denied, only treated as irrelevant to social kinds, functioning as contextual constraints on behavioral facts.

The difficulty with this account is that none of the richness of the folk concepts we use to describe social kinds would be preserved. In particular, except for very clear cases, it would be hard to motivate the very idea of group membership, or relations of self and other. We could only conceive of social kinds as whole systems of behavior. If we reject this account, it will not be because it is absurd, or incompatible with BOTT, but because we are convinced that it distorts the social reality that it seeks to explain.

**Critical anti-realism.** In contrast, the critical anti-realist’s approach to existence of social kinds will have no need or use for BOTT as an account of their persistence. The critical approach holds that any unpretentious use of an expression related to an aggregate is a reference to a social kind, so long as the speaker is in the appropriate position to speak for that aggregate. BOTT would be neither necessary nor sufficient for this approach: unnecessary, because one might imagine cases where one thinks they are justified in speaking for others in the aggregate based merely on the fact of a shared organizational structure and nothing else (for instance); insufficient, because we can imagine cases where a person would not be able to speak for others despite sharing a cell, cluster, or network.

Yet BOTT, or something like it, is necessary to an account of social kinds because, in my view, the truth of any matter of fact ought to be tied very closely with some reasonable idea why one may persist in holding to a judgment in the future. Diachronicity is essential to substantive claims of truth, in the sense that saying something is substantially true is to imply (defeasibly) a commitment to the judgment’s veracity during the course of Socratic revision of the rest of their web of beliefs, and commitment to some notion of the persistence conditions of the object or states of affairs under scrutiny. Pretentious speech is indifferent to substantial truth in that sense. Yet BOTT could quite naturally be a partial criterion for unpretentiousness, so far as persistence conditions are concerned, as it tracks the presence of the relevant trust-relationships between speaker and fellow members required for solidarity.

To be clear, the proprieties of true speech are grounded in ethnocentric projections of a progressively widening sense of inclusion, based on ideals of love and universality. These ideals, and the set of projected attitudes that are their basis, are not necessarily social mechanisms (as I have understood them). So, nothing seems to prevent a neopragmatist who is allied with a government-in-exile from thinking that they can say true things about the new laws offered by that government over its former citizens, despite its dire straits. All they have to do is think the government is morally just and worthy of approbation, and identify with that government as a progressive one. In contrast, BOTT suggests – quite reasonably, I think – that, for all its moral worthiness, this sort of speech is pretentious. The government in exile is not a government at all. If the critical approach disagrees, then the burden is on its advocates to articulate what would count as meaningful trust-relations, such that it has consequences that diverge from BOTT.

It may sound as though I am being overly negative towards the critical approach. I do not mean to dismiss its approach as a theory entirely; rather, I only think it is unfit as a theory of the *existence* of social kinds. However, in my view, something very much like it *does* potentially explain how social kinds are identified or numerically counted. Still, I have proceeded on the assumption that counting exercises are distinct from ontological ones, and exploring those affinities and contrasts goes beyond the scope of this paper.

**Quasi-realism.** The final contender is quasi-realism, according to which our social kinds are fully grounded in facts that are, in some attenuated sense, independent of the mind. This view is somewhat more palatable, and has enjoyed a recent thorough accounting in (Epstein, 2015). For the sake of illustration, I have offered two sub-varieties of the quasi-realist picture, which I called the *executive theory* and the *dissolution theory*. The executive theory holds that the existence of a social kind depends on there being facts that are independent of most of the minds of its constituent members, i.e., just in case there are authority relationships in some population. The dissolution theory holds that the existence of a social kind depends on there being facts that are independent of the will of any of its members. The executive theory seems to favor persistence in the form of networks, biopower, and the total system, and disfavors the notion that clusters (e.g., a culture) are themselves social kinds. Meanwhile, the dissolution theory does the reverse, recognizing the existence of clusters as social kinds while treating the others as superordinate ones. From a certain historical perspective, social kinds only persist when they reflect interaction chains and reproduce certain orientations to their environment. On this view, organizations come and go, but ultimately, they are transient.

The anchor theory challenges the distinction I have made between existence and persistence conditions, arguing that: i) the fact that a social kind (x) exists at time (t) means we have to set out both initiation and elimination conditions, and ii) there is no particular reason why either of these conditions must involve member intentionality. On this view, the ‘grotto survivors’ (which we discussed above) could come out as a social kind, even though neither the initiation or elimination conditions required any reference to member intentionality. And that consequence seems entirely correct, for me: I see no intuitive point in denying that grotto survivors are a (subordinate) social kind.

Even so, what is missing from this account is any necessary appreciation for the role of solidarity in the persistence of a social kind, the ‘glue’ of trust-relationships that hold a social unit together. This is a mistake, reflecting a failure to take the ‘social’ part of ‘social metaphysics’ seriously. Brian Epstein, for instance, argues that solidarity is not a needed feature, ostensibly because it implies a unity of purpose that is often absent (Epstein, 2015, p. 255). To some extent, this depends on vocabulary. For Epstein seems to have inferred that social solidarity must involve ‘thick’ shared attitudes of the kind we find in (Gilbert, 2003; Tuomela, 2003). In my view, solidarity requires some reference to certain thin attitudes of individuals, namely those epistemic attitudes inherent to trust, risk, and expectation. Indeed, in the distinction between organic and mechanical solidarity as an account of his division of labor, Durkheim need not imply anything quite like a unity of purpose or individual intentionality, and it is that sense of the word, and the sense of integration, that seems necessary. Indeed, it would be surprising to find any cases that lacked trust-relationships of that sort. e.g., the intramural basketball team which lacks solidarity is not long for the world.

Still, these are only side-remarks. For, on further investigation, any of these theories might be true; or perhaps it might turn out that none of them are. Ultimately, the question has to be resolved by looking carefully at the social sciences and the comparative worth that mechanisms of this sort play a reliable role in explaining the evidence they collect, and by appealing to other relevant issues in metaphysics and epistemology.

1. **Conclusion**

To understand what is happening in the world, we need to appreciate the potential diversity of social kinds, and let social science figure out the rest. To that end, I have argued in favor of anti-realism, and in favor of an ecumenical attitude towards the potential varieties of social kinds, reflected by BOTT. I have also argued against realism, which denies that any intentionality is relevant to the explanation of phenomena that we would want to call social. That said, each view on the existence of social kinds affects the varieties of kinds that are recognized through BOTT.

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1. A more common phrase would be ‘personal identity’ or identity conditions, except that this label invites certain sorts of worries about countability that are seemingly irrelevant, e.g., in fission cases. Like Derek Parfit, I am mainly interested in talking about those conditions where a thing survives, not whether it is identical to its previous state. (Parfit, 1971) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I take it that the study of identity would have two parts. First, we would have to set out the *identification* conditions, i.e., conditions for *counting* social kinds. That would require a special – and separate -- treatment. Second, one would have to have a theory of *identity, period*. I do not think there is much to an identity relation than its semantic function: i.e., two terms are identical in content just in case they are substitutable without a change in the truth-conditions (or the conditions related to proprieties of assertion or assent) of all those judgments of which they play a proper part. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The sense of realism here should be distinguished from ‘group realism’, in a sense deployed by (Ritchie, 2015), which merely assents to the view that there are such things as groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Borrowing inspiration from some remarks made by Brian Epstein, though he is not a realist in the sense being entertained here. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. So-called metaphysical legal realists, like (Moore, 1995) or (Stavropoulos, 1996), seem more like quasi-realists to me. I am tempted to say that the “bodies in spaces” position belongs to (Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, 1977), at least on one reading of the meaning of ‘biopower’. But I hesitate in fully attributing this to him, given his reliance on the importance of strategic action. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is a point made most vivid in a discussion of natural kinds, e.g., in (Magnus, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The critical aspect of this view may be based in part on the view that our conceptual analysis has to be ameliorative, as suggested by (Haslanger, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The first two theses are developed from themes in Philip Pettit’s *The Common Mind*, i.e., his discussion of collectivism and holism, respectively. (Pettit, 1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One might also cite Marìa Lugone’s conception of curdled identity as a precursor. (Lugones, 1994) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. To say that they are equally valid is not to say they are equally desirable; clearly, full personhood is an ideal state. But we achieve self-realization only through a checkered history through these other forms, and this fact is no grounds to say we were not persons the whole time. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this note. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Especially master narratives: see (Code, 2006). Also poignant are those cases where narratives play a part in ‘holding together’ those who suffer from mental illness; see (Molas, 2016). Though Molas argues that palliative narratives ought to be first-personal, they are ultimately part of an ecological framework borrowed from Code.

    On a pure niche view, there is nothing to a ‘group’ other than the fact that some people present as members of that name or label and are adapted to their habitat in various ways. This theory might appeal to those who find philosophical nominalism attractive. E.g., (Hacking, 2004; Hacking, 1999) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I see a spiritual resemblance between this tripartite view and Amie Thomasson’s approach, though I do not agree with the accent she places upon moral normative statuses as central to sociality. (Thomasson, 2016) At best, sociality concerns *responsibility*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. One advantage of the collectivized BOT theory is that it provides an account of the ship of Theseus thought-experiment. So, the ship of Theseus can be remade plank by plank or person by person, but if so then it had better stay under the same organizational structure, and sail under the same mast and name; else it be the ship of Theseus no more. This implies an intensional mereology (Moltmann, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As to *which* political economy, I leave the matter unspecified, except to say that AO Hirschmann and Elinor Ostrom have to be on the syllabus (Hirschman, 1970; Ostrom, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Alternatively, one might investigate the capitalist order itself as a total system, albeit primarily constituted by the tendencies of firms. Capitalists may care for each other very little during the course of their activities -- but they care very much about each other *qua* capitalists. Indeed, if they did not, there could be no unpretentious way of speaking about the social system of capitalism at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)