

Essentialism Regarding Human Nature in the Defence of Gender Equality in Education

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In this article I consider contemporary philosophical conceptions of human nature from the point of view of the ideal of gender equality. My main argument is that an essentialist account of human nature, unlike what I take to be its two main alternatives (the subjectivist account and the cultural account), is able coherently to justify the educational pursuit of this ideal. By essentialism I refer to the idea that there are some features common to all human beings (independent of individual, cultural and historical factors) that are conducive to a good life and human flourishing. I also consider the main philosophical challenge of essentialism, the naturalistic fallacy, and the ways in which contemporary versions of essentialism might escape this charge.

INTRODUCTION

An essentialist account of human nature could, at first sight, seem to be something that a dedicated feminist philosopher should oppose. Essentialism is often associated with old-fashioned, conservative and even patriarchal thinking, and thus, it is understood as something entirely inappropriate for the adequate justification of the ideals crucial to feminist philosophy. In this article I shall, nevertheless, argue that this resistance to essentialism, often expressed in feminist philosophy, derives mostly from a conceptual confusion and that in fact philosophical justification for advancing one crucial ideal of feminist philosophy, an ideal of gender equality in education, confronts these difficulties without any commitment to a particular version of essentialism. An essentialist account of human nature, unlike what I see as its two main alternatives (the subjectivist account and the cultural account), is able coherently to justify the pursuit of gender equality in education.

There is always something of a problem when one refers to 'feminist philosophy' and draws on this in one's work since feminist philosophy does not form a uniform system of thinking but is rather a manifold and pluralistic tradition or set of traditions.¹ The focus of this article is

confined to one particular ideal derived from feminist philosophy, the ideal of gender equality, and to the conditions in which the pursuit of this ideal in education is philosophically justified. Although my focus does not do justice to the wide range of feminist philosophy in general, I have decided to use the idea of feminist philosophy for the reason that my understanding of the concept of gender equality owes much to my feminist studies. To me it is important to be conscious of the tension between equality and difference in feminist discussions of gender equality (see, for example, Cudd and Jones, 2003). In my view, the definition of the ideal of gender equality as this might be applied in education must be informed by feminist philosophy in the sense that (i) it takes into account the cultural and historical construction of the gender system, and (ii) it is sensitive to gender differences as they appear in educational contexts (understood, of course, in the light of their cultural and historical construction).² In my view, the pursuit of real gender equality in education must take into account the complex process of the historical construction of gender difference (see, for example, Lloyd, 1984) and its effect on today's conceptions and ways of acting, choosing and behaving.

By 'an essentialist account of human nature', I refer to the idea that there are some features common to all human beings—that is, independent of individual, cultural and historical factors—that are conducive to a good life and human flourishing. Various interpretations of this idea can be found in contemporary philosophy, some of these ideas being committed to a more 'metaphysical' account of human nature and the human good, and some others, in contrast, deriving more from empirical matters and from human experience. In this article I shall introduce the basic idea common to all versions of essentialism regarding human nature.

This article is divided into five sections, the first one dedicated to conceptual clarification and the fifth one to conclusions. In the first section I shall conceptually clarify the term 'essentialism' and argue that the main undesirable implications associated with the term do not follow from the essentialist account of human nature defended in this article. In contrast, these implications follow from another conception, which is also termed 'essentialism' in contemporary academic conversation. This version of essentialism classifies people by the 'essential features' of their reference group, for instance sex, race, age, etc.; that is, people in such groups are understood in the light of their *different* essential features. Essentialism regarding human nature, in contrast, states that there are features *common* to all human beings. For feminist philosophy, the crucial version of this vicious kind of essentialism is naturally gender essentialism. In the second section I shall outline a basic account of essentialism regarding human nature. I shall compare this account of human nature with what I take to be its alternatives, the subjectivist account and the cultural account, and I shall argue for its supremacy in justifying the ideal of gender equality pursued in education. Essentialism is able to preserve the ideal of gender equality by relying on its conception of humanity and the human good, whereas subjective and culturally relative accounts forfeit the possibility of justifying this ideal in a way that would have significance in educational

terms.³ In the third section I shall briefly present three different interpretations of essentialism regarding human nature in contemporary philosophy and consider their connections to the argument I am defending in this article. I shall present Alasdair MacIntyre as a main defender of essentialism in contemporary moral philosophy, Martha Nussbaum from the realm of feminist and political philosophy, and Israel Scheffler from that of educational philosophy.⁴ These three philosophers differ from each other in both their background assumptions and their lines of argument, all nevertheless sharing the basic idea of essentialism regarding human nature. In the fourth section I shall consider the main philosophical challenge of essentialism, the naturalistic fallacy; that is, I shall ask whether essentialism regarding human nature violates the principle that *you cannot get an 'ought' from an 'is'*. There are, roughly speaking, two possible lines of argument in positing essentialism in relation to this problem. The first one links essence to naturalness in the biological sense; that is, it says that biological features somehow define what should be counted as essential in human life. This line of argument, although often used both in everyday conversation and in academia, is philosophically untenable. Another, and better, possibility is to define the things essential for good human life in light of our experience. The most promising version of this idea takes as relevant experience not only the experience each individual happens to have today but also that more collective understanding of human experience that is derived (via academic research, perhaps) from different eras and different cultures. This version nevertheless takes essentialism as its starting point, and it is thus circular. It cannot, therefore, serve on its own as a philosophical justification for essentialism but needs some supplementary argument. In this article, I shall suggest that this line of thought should be combined with the arguments that the main alternatives to essentialism (i) are similarly circular and (ii) cannot be accepted consistently with the ideal of gender equality pursued in education. In the fifth section I offer a brief summary of the version of essentialism developed in this article as an account of human nature that would preserve an ideal of gender equality in education.

ESSENTIALISM—CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Essentialism is becoming a philosophically 'dirty' word in the academy and in those parts of human life that are influenced by it. Essentialism—which for these purposes I shall understand as the view that human life has certain central defining features—is linked by its opponents with an ignorance of history and with lack of sensitivity to the voices of women and minorities. It is taken, usually without extended argument, to be in league with racism and sexism and with 'patriarchal' thinking generally, whereas extreme subjectivism is taken to be a recipe for social progress (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 205).

This previous quotation, from Martha Nussbaum's 'Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism', captures the usual connotations of essentialism in

contemporary philosophy. In this section I shall consider some misinterpretations and conceptual confusions that may have had their effect upon the ‘dirtiness’ of the term.

My argument with regard to this confusion is that most contemporary debate about essentialism is not alert to a fundamental distinction that would decisively clarify the discussion and make clear the fact that the different versions of essentialism have entirely distinct moral, political and educational implications. I suggest that essentialism related to human beings should be divided into (at least) three groups; I make a distinction between (1) individual essentialism, (2) group (gender, race, class, etc.) essentialism and (3) essentialism regarding human nature.

By individual essentialism I refer to the idea that each individual has her own person-specific ‘essence’, that is, those features or characteristics that she wishes to realise, and that, if realised or approached, will lead to a good life for this individual. In educational terms, it would follow from the acceptance of individual essentialism, for example, that the task of the educator is, first, to find out everyone’s personal and individual essence and, second, to facilitate the realisation of that essence. Although individual essentialism could in fact be accepted independently of the other two versions of essentialism, it is, nevertheless, irrelevant to the theme of this article.

Essentialism concerning groups is the version of essentialism that has given rise to reasoned anxiety both in philosophy of education and in feminist philosophy. Any classifying by race, age, gender, etc., easily implies unequal educational opportunities, which are based not, in the final analysis, on adequate information about the learning abilities of the members of these groups but on prejudices. Feminist philosophy has been particularly worried regarding gender essentialism, and, in the realm of philosophy of education, Scheffler has argued against this version of essentialism in general.⁵

Essentialism regarding human nature, in contrast, states that there are some features of humanity that all human beings share, and that these are features whose cultivation produces a good human life.⁶

ESSENTIALISM REGARDING HUMAN NATURE AND ITS MAIN PHILOSOPHICAL ALTERNATIVES

In this section I shall present an essentialist account of human nature and its two main alternatives, subjectivism and culturalism,⁷ and I shall argue that these alternatives cannot consistently preserve the ideal of gender equality. My argument in this section follows Nussbaum’s thinking, applying the lines of her thinking to educational policy and practice.

The first alternative, subjectivism, understands human nature as entirely relative, situational and individual, and rejects the possibility of generalisation. On the strength of this, the ideal of gender equality, as well as the ideal of human equality in general, should also be understood as a person-relative ideal with no generalisability. Nussbaum demonstrates these

undesirable implications of subjectivism: 'So, if I want to play around with torture and slavery and you want to stop me, nothing can be said about the moral superiority of you to me. You have your way of playing, I have mine' (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 210). This argument naturally applies to the subjectivist positions regarding gender equality and the oppression of women: nothing can be said about the moral superiority of equality, and thus no arguments for the pursuit of gender equality in education can justifiably be presented. Thus it is impossible to defend, from the very starting point of subjectivism, the idea that gender equality should be defended, say, in educational policy or public education.

The second alternative, the cultural (or historical) account of human nature, is not as relativistic as subjectivism. This position takes 'essential' features as products of culture and civilisation and thus it allows some 'essential' features or values shared with persons who share the same cultural framework. The question of the justification of the ideal of gender equality, however, interestingly illustrates the problems that the cultural account confronts. The defence of gender equality on the strength of a cultural understanding of human nature actually faces two separate problems, the first arising on the inside of our own cultural contexts (that is, in the Western culture where feminist philosophy has its roots) and the other arising when feminist philosophy is defended in multicultural contexts.

The first problem follows from the idea that the ideals our cultural reference group supports are *merely* products of that civilisation and development of that culture.⁸ One must, therefore, raise a question along the following lines: although the majority of the members of Western culture happen, nowadays, to value gender equality, what if they were some day to abandon this ideal and instead to favour inequality and the oppression of women? Would this be counted as a new step in cultural development, or as some kind of regression? I see no philosophically justified way to defend gender equality from a cultural point of view in a situation where the majority sees it as undesirable. As Nussbaum puts the point, it follows from this position that 'torture should be illegal only because at this time of our history, the majority votes that way. Sexual privacy, on the other hand, should not be protected where state laws give evidence that a majority would prefer to interfere' (p. 211). This argument naturally has straightforward implications for educational policy and the choices made in the practices of everyday education.

Another problem, one that arises in a multicultural context, is that from the point of view of a cultural account we are not justified in advocating our own ideals (such as gender equality) for adoption by those in other cultures; or, to put the matter negatively, we are not justified in criticising the practices of other cultures on the grounds that these do not accord with our principles. Nevertheless, it is quite problematic for a feminist to say to the women of other cultures that the rights of women apply only to Western women. The undesirable implications of a culturally relative account in multicultural conversations have also been nicely captured by Nussbaum:

Highly intelligent people, people deeply committed to the good of women and men in developing countries, people who think of themselves as progressive and feminist and anti-racists, are taking up positions that converge . . . with the positions of reaction, oppression and sexism. Under the banner of their radical and politically correct 'antiessentialism' march ancient religious taboos, the luxury of the pampered husband, ill health, ignorance and death (p. 204).

An essentialist account of human nature proposes, as already mentioned, that there are some elements in human life common to all human beings, independently of their cultural, historical or individual situations, that are, when pursued and realised, ways towards a good human life and towards human flourishing. Essentialism thus avoids the problems its two alternatives confront.⁹

INTERPRETATIONS OF ESSENTIALISM IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

In this section I shall briefly introduce some interpretations of essentialism regarding human nature in contemporary philosophy and relate them to the argument I am presenting in this article. I shall introduce (1) MacIntyre as one of the most significant defenders of essentialism in contemporary moral philosophy (2) Nussbaum as a figure from feminist philosophy who has defended essentialism as a necessary position for public life and (3) Scheffler as a philosopher of education who has included a moderate essentialism regarding human nature in his educational philosophy.¹⁰

In his celebrated book *After Virtue* MacIntyre argues that the whole project of moral philosophy both during and after the Enlightenment is doomed to failure owing to its rejection of the Aristotelian conception of *telos*. The concept of *telos* is crucial to Aristotle's essentialism, and it refers to the idea of the human being as she could be, if she realised her potential essence (as opposed, that is, to her untutored human nature). According to MacIntyre, this conception is necessary for any rational ethical conversation (MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 49–59). The problem of contemporary moral philosophy, he claims, is that it takes as its starting points two incompatible sets of assumptions: that is, its conception of human nature and the moral beliefs it attempts rationally to justify are totally inconsistent with each other. MacIntyre argues in his book that the only possibility, apart from overall subjectivism in moral philosophy, is some kind of reversion to a conception of *telos* (that is, to a kind of essentialism) in our understanding of human nature (pp. 49–59).

My argument has similarities with MacIntyre's argument, since I am arguing that a philosophically adequate defence of gender equality needs an essentialist understanding of human nature. To defend gender equality is actually to defend an ethical position to the effect that people should be treated equally independently of their biological sex as well as their social gender identity. As I have argued earlier, it is not possible to defend this

idea from the starting point of the subjectivist or the cultural understanding of human nature. In one sense, my argument can be seen as a version of MacIntyre's applied to a feminist-orientated philosophy of education.

In feminist philosophy, Martha Nussbaum has expressively defended an essentialist account of human nature. In contrast to MacIntyre's theoretical argument concerning discrepancies in anti-essentialist moral philosophy, Nussbaum bases her argument on her practical experiences of problems in academic and political conversations concerning human life and the human good—for example, in development co-operation. Nussbaum finds that these conversations tend to result in undesirable or even absurd conclusions, owing to the anti-essentialist premises held by most parties to the conversation (Nussbaum, 1992, pp. 203–206). She seeks instead to formulate an idea of essentialism that would not be 'metaphysical'¹¹ or peculiar to any single philosophical, metaphysical or religious tradition, but rather common to all human beings. As Nussbaum herself describes this non-metaphysical starting point:

[W]e must ask, which things are so important that we will not count a life as a human life without them? Such an evaluative inquiry into what is deepest and most indispensable in our lives need not presuppose an external metaphysical foundation, clearly: it can be a way of looking at ourselves, asking what we really think about ourselves and what holds our history together (p. 208).

Nussbaum's account—which 'aims to be as universal as possible.' (p. 215)—includes such aspects as 'mortality', 'the human body', 'capacity for pleasure and pain', 'cognitive capability', 'early infant development', 'practical reason', 'affiliation with other human beings', 'relatedness to other species and nature', 'humor and play' and 'separateness' (p. 216–220). It is, nevertheless, important to realise that to espouse a form of essentialism regarding human nature does not necessarily imply acceptance of these particular aspects. In contrast, Nussbaum herself emphasises that her account does not need actual agreement 'in order to play the moral and political role that we want it to play' (p. 223). Continuing a conversation concerning the content of the concepts of human nature and the human good would naturally be maintained even if essentialism were in principle accepted. It is also important to note that the essentialist assumption does not deny the value of plurality and personal and cultural aspects in addition to the shared ones.

The argument defended in this paper can be seen also as a version of Nussbaum's argument applied to the realm of education. In her writings, Nussbaum has demonstrated the problems that anti-essentialist understandings of human nature produce in multicultural conversation and activity, and I have argued that similar kinds of problems arise in defending gender equality in education from the basis of anti-essentialism. Moreover, the way that Nussbaum's argument derives from practice and

human experience seems to me to exemplary for the advancing of a similar case in educational philosophy.

In philosophy of education, I take Scheffler as an example of a moderate essentialist on human nature. As already mentioned, it may be surprising that I count Israel Scheffler as an essentialist, since his rejection of essentialism is one of the famous stances in the history of analytical philosophy of education. His critique is, nevertheless, directed mostly to essentialism concerning individuals and groups, and, as I see it, his philosophy of education on the whole indicates a moderate essentialism regarding human nature. To be precise, Scheffler defends an ideal of rationality as an ultimate educational ideal, which should, in the final analysis, define the contents, methods and aims of education.¹² He defends this ideal for reasons peculiar to essentialism: it relates to the achievement of the good life both for individuals and, due to its connection with democracy, for societies.¹³

In this sense, what Nussbaum has argued for public life and political purposes,¹⁴ Scheffler has argued for education. Both the ideal of rationality as an ultimate educational ideal and the defence of the concept of an educated person are ideas that involve a moderate essentialism, and neither classifies people (by sex, race, age, etc.) nor rules out pluralism and richness in terms of personal and cultural variations.

The tradition of feminist philosophy and feminist studies has always questioned the institution of gender as a dichotomy that permeates the whole of society and even our system of thinking. To me, educational ideals that are common to all human beings and simultaneously allow the richness of personal and cultural variations serve best in the pursuit of deconstructing gender dichotomy.¹⁵

ESSENTIALISM AND THE NATURALISTIC FALLACY

As in all philosophical positions, an essentialist account of human nature naturally has its own problems to solve. After defending the supremacy of essentialism over its main rivals, and especially in defending a feminist philosophy of education, I shall turn now to address its main philosophical challenge, which is connected to the principle of the naturalistic fallacy—that you cannot get an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’. As Scheffler in his rejection of essentialism puts this traditional problem of moral philosophy, ‘No magic bridge connects alleged *facts* concerning essences with the supposed *values* of their realizations’ (Scheffler, 1985, p. 43). In this section I shall consider two versions of essentialism sometimes defended in contemporary academic conversation that collapse into the naturalistic fallacy alongside MacIntyre’s version of essentialism, which avoids the naturalistic fallacy by taking the essentialist understanding of human nature as its starting point in order to explain phenomena crucial to our ethical conceptions. This argument, which takes essentialism as its starting point, is inevitably circular and thus cannot serve on its own as a compelling justification for essentialism. In this section I shall also,

therefore, offer the supplementary arguments needed to justify essentialism in educational philosophy.

In their attempt to defend essentialism, some of the arguments of contemporary sociobiology are founded upon a naturalistic fallacy—for example, when features considered to be essential for good human life are extrapolated directly from biological factors. This line of argument, although its variations are often used, not only in everyday conversation but also in academia,¹⁶ is philosophically untenable. First, there are no good reasons for drawing ethical inferences from biological factors. As Louise M. Antony writes: ‘the fact—if it is one—that such human universals as exist are due to our *nature* as human beings is itself of no ethical importance’ (Antony, 2000, p. 12). Second, there are no adequate criteria to distinguish between natural and ‘unnatural’ features of human life, and thus, the distinction between essential and unessential features appears to be impossible on the basis of a biological argument.

MacIntyre, for his part, argues that the principle of the naturalistic fallacy was born at a particular point in the history of philosophy, in the early part of the Enlightenment, and it followed exactly from the rejection of the concept of *telos* in the understanding of human nature. Thus, the principle is justified only if that concept of human nature, as elaborated by the Enlightenment (and contextualised by MacIntyre), is accepted—and an essentialist understanding of human nature (as I am arguing for in this paper) is rejected (cf. MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 49–59). MacIntyre’s solution to the problem of the naturalistic fallacy is thus to illustrate by a historical analysis that the principle actually appears for the first time when an essentialist understanding of human nature is rejected. Indeed, if essentialism is taken as a starting point for our understanding of human nature, then clearly there are some ethical principles that can indeed be understood as ‘facts’ of human nature in the sense that following them is likely to lead to good human lives and to human flourishing, for the reason that human nature is that which flourishes when these principles are followed. But as already mentioned, this argument takes essentialism as its starting point and is thus circular. To be admissible in a defence of essentialism, therefore, it needs supplementary support. In the present paper, the justification of gender equality in education extends the argument towards such an end. From this vantage point the other possibilities, subjectivism and culturalism, do not explain our experience of the value of gender equality (and human dignity in general) pursued in education.¹⁷ So, we are philosophically justified in accepting essentialism, since it is able to explain phenomena that its alternatives are not able to explain. Furthermore, it is important to realise that not only is the defence of essentialism circular, but so too are the defences of subjectivism and culturalism. The philosophical justification of subjectivism takes subjectivism as its starting point, and likewise so does culturalism. So, if we have only circular explanations available, we are justified in taking essentialism as the best theory we have at the moment.¹⁸

To take essentialism as our starting point allows us to define the things essential for good human life in the light of our experience.

The most promising version of this idea takes as relevant experience not only one's own experience as it happens to be now, but a more collective understanding of human experience derived from different eras and different cultures. Indeed in this way, it seems to be possible to discover features necessary for good human life. Something like that also seems to be Nussbaum's basic conception, when she writes that 'it can be a way of looking at ourselves, asking what we really think about ourselves and what holds our history together' (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 208).

ESSENTIALISM AND GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

In this article I have argued that the defence of gender equality pursued in education needs a conception of human nature and the human good that goes beyond personally and culturally relative features. By clarifying the fact that I am not defending essentialism in terms of individuals or groups (conceptions that are also termed 'essentialist' in contemporary academic debate) but rather the essentialist conception of human nature, I have thereby separated my argument from the criticism directed at the other two versions of essentialism.

I have argued that the two possible alternatives to essentialism, subjectivism and culturalism, encounter fatal difficulties in their attempts philosophically to justify the ideal of gender equality; in contrast the essentialist understanding of human nature that I have developed is able to preserve consistently the ideal of gender equality (as pursued, for instance, in education).¹⁹

The essentialist account of human nature I have proposed as an adequate conception for a feminist educational philosophy is a synthesis of the conceptions of MacIntyre, Nussbaum and Scheffler. With MacIntyre, I share the argument that an essentialist understanding of human nature is needed for rational justification of ethical principles (for instance, the principle that both sexes share human dignity equally and should thus be equally treated).²⁰ With Nussbaum I share the idea that essentialism can be defended on the basis of practice and experience, the most obvious phenomenon bearing this out being the way that discussion in such realms as multicultural co-operation or education often descend into absurdities and that accepting an essentialist account of human nature can help to avoid these absurdities. With Scheffler, I share the idea that the educational ideals should be formed in such a way that they would apply to men and women alike (Scheffler, 1995, pp. 93–96). Indeed, for me the fact that the earlier educational ideals were 'male-biased' is no reason to construct separate and distinctly feminine ideals, but rather a reason to reform the old ideals in the light of, amongst other things, their feminist critiques.

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NOTES

1. My own participation in feminist philosophy from the background of the analytical tradition, or my participation in the analytical tradition by asking questions derived from feminist philosophy, naturally has connections to so-called *analytic feminism* (see, for example, Garry, 2004). An emphasis on educational philosophy is a key factor in distinguishing my approach from analytic feminism.
2. Sensitivity to gender differences is crucial, because sometimes positive discrimination is needed to triumph over the students' learning difficulties in terms of abilities that have been, in our cultural context, earlier understood as something that belongs only to the realm of the other sex.
3. My argument for the supremacy of essentialism applies most clearly to public education. In more private spheres of education (like homes or small private schools formed by only one ethnic group), there may possibly be philosophically coherent ways of defending subjectivist or cultural accounts of human nature applied in education. These defences do not, nevertheless, have any wider applicability, and thus they are quite irrelevant for the most part to educational philosophy.
4. Note that Scheffler does not call himself an essentialist. On the contrary, he is famous for his rejection of essentialism. This rejection, as I shall argue later, must be understood in relation to essentialism of individuals and groups, not in terms of essentialism on human nature in general. Scheffler's philosophy of education on the whole indicates that he shares the idea of ideals common to all human beings (see, for example, Scheffler, 1973, 1995).
5. Scheffler states that essentialist understanding in philosophy of education is a historical residue from Aristotle's teleological metaphysics and thus should not be accepted in a contemporary understanding of human nature and potential (Scheffler, 1985, pp. 42–43). Although Scheffler's argument is directed towards all essentialism, a closer reading reveals that Scheffler is particularly concerned about the first two versions of essentialism—that is, individual essentialism and essentialism about groups—for the reason that these kinds of suppositions can be used in explaining different learning results; which explanation, on its part, hides educators' and policy-makers' responsibility to guarantee the best possible learning opportunities to everyone (Scheffler, 1985). The point of essentialism regarding human nature is not to endorse this kind of argument; it is rather to point towards the equality of all human beings.
6. Note that essentialism says neither that *all* shared features produce human flourishing nor that *only* shared features can produce a good life, but only that there are *some* such features common to all that produce a good life and human flourishing when realised.
7. I owe this classification to Heikki Kannisto (Kannisto, 1994, pp. 10–29), although he terms the subjectivist position 'naturalism.' In regard to my theme 'naturalism' would nevertheless be a misleading term. Kannisto seems to suppose that subjectivism on human nature is (always) connected to 'naturalism' in the sense that a naturalist sees it to be justified to suppose only the things based on the world view of (natural) science. In Kannisto's sense, one would be subjectivist on human nature for the reason that contemporary natural sciences do not imply essentialism. Although this kind of naturalism is one reason to accept subjectivism, there are also subjectivists on human nature that are subjectivists also in terms of science, i.e. they think that scientific knowledge is as subjective as any other source of knowledge. Another problem in terms of equating subjectivism with naturalism appears especially in the realm of education. As a practical activity covering all realms of human life, 'practical theories' or 'the best we have now' theories are also needed in conducting educational practice, otherwise many important areas (like moral education) would be left out. Therefore, in education I deem it as reasonable to search

- for understanding of, say, human nature or morality that would do service for a full-bodied education (and critical conversation of it!) although this understanding is not 'scientific' in the strict sense of natural sciences. In this sense, it is not surprising that pragmatism is often seen to be a useful approach for educational philosophy.
8. 'Merely' refers in this sentence to the idea that all the values are culturally construed and culture-dependent, and thus the things valued in our culture have no value outside of this cultural context.
 9. That position naturally does not exclude the individual and group-bounded dimension that can also produce good life and flourishing, but says only that there are some 'universal' dimensions *in addition to* more situational ones. It says neither that all shared features are features that produce good human life, but only that some of them do.
 10. It is worth noting that these three philosophers differ from each other on their interpretations of essentialism; for example, Nussbaum writes that her account of Aristotle is very different from MacIntyre's account (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 240). In terms of this article it is nevertheless crucial that they all defend an essentialist account of human nature.
 11. Martha Nussbaum also introduces a distinction between 'externalist' and 'internalist' versions of essentialism, and argues that her internalist interpretation avoids many of the problems of being metaphysical in a vicious sense that an externalist account is. By internalism Nussbaum refers to a conception that is not metaphysical and does not rely on any external source, but depends upon our own understanding of ourselves as human beings (Nussbaum, 1992, pp. 203–208).
 12. It cannot be overemphasised when Scheffler's ideal of rationality is considered that this ideal should not be understood as a narrow conception of instrumental or calculative rationality; it is a wide-ranging conception including emotional, political and moral aspects of human life (see Scheffler, 1973, p. 60; 1991, pp. 3–17; 1986).
 13. Scheffler also defends R. S. Peters' conception of an educated person (Scheffler, 1995), which, as I see it, is an essentialist conception. Moreover, as Scheffler emphasised in our conversation in December 2003, values and morality are, for him, the primary conditions for a good life, and a person who does not commit herself to them, jeopardises her own full membership in our human community, and thus diminishes her own possibilities for a rewarding life (Scheffler, 2003). This all supports my hypothesis that Scheffler should be interpreted as a (moderate) essentialist on human nature.
 14. According to Nussbaum, the connection of extreme subjectivism with social progress is a fallacy and, by contrast, an essentialist conception of human nature is actually needed in human life: 'I have said that we urgently need a version of essentialism in public life. If we reject it, we reject guidance that is crucial if we are to construct an adequate account of distributive justice to guide public policy in many areas' (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 229).
 15. Here, again, I refer to Scheffler's defence of shared ideals instead of gender-dependent ideals (Scheffler, 1997, p. 264; 1995, pp. 93–96).
 16. For example, some contemporary sociobiologists argue that maintaining the idea of fundamental differences between men and women is well-grounded in biological knowledge (see, for example, Groenhout's demonstration of the argumentation of contemporary sociobiology in Groenhout, 2002, pp. 62–66) and on the strength of this such sociobiologists conclude that to maintain gender dichotomy is to preserve the possibility of the good for both sexes. It is difficult to see why arguments from biology should persuade a person that she ought to live her life along the lines of dichotomised gender roles if she herself finds her life more rewarding by following some other course.
 17. My argument follows again, in some sense, along the lines of MacIntyre, since his account could be understood as holding that the various versions of subjectivism do not give a sufficient explanation for our moral beliefs and their rational justification, whereas essentialism does.
 18. Actually all the theories, not only in ethics but also in science, have the status of being 'the best we have at the moment'. One crucial feature of contemporary philosophy of science is the fallibilist understanding of scientific theories. Fallibilism means that we accept all human knowledge as possibly mistaken, and subject to further research and correction. Certainly there are differences between scientific theories and 'practical theories' in the sense that the scientific ones are warranted through their empirical testability, etc.
 19. I have argued along the lines of Nussbaum that 'to give up ... on a normative account of the human being and human functioning was to turn things over to the free play of forces in a world

situation in which the social forces affecting the lives of women, minorities, and the poor are rarely benign' (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 212). As this quotation from Nussbaum shows, the need for an essentialist understanding of human nature is not limited to the ideal of gender equality but is applicable on a much wider scope. For example, human rights claims constitute but one highly relevant example with regard to essentialist claims regarding human nature. Since human rights claims have quite often been criticised as being western and ethnocentric, it is notable that the essentialist account of human nature does not need to be fleshed out in such detail. As a further example, take the fact that any reference to autonomy as an educational ideal common and commendable to all subjects of education implies essentialism, since according to subjectivism no such ideal can be imposed, and according to the cultural account, it can apply only to people within cultural groups who share the same cultural ideal of autonomy. Totally to abandon the essentialist conception of human nature is actually to undermine not only the whole project of feminism but also the possibility for the philosophy of education justifiably to contribute to educational practices. The basic question in all these cases becomes: How do we defend the rights of marginalised groups, women, as well as minorities, in a debate where all the ideals, even ideals as basic as human rights, may be questioned as defending a culturally biased conception of 'human nature' and 'human good'?

20. My example.

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