

Draft paper; comments very welcome!

# **Moritz Geiger's Notion of Dynamic Essence – a Challenge for the Contemporary 'Platonic' Conception of Essence?**

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In 1924, the Munich-school phenomenologist Moritz Geiger argued that there are dynamic essences. His two examples are the tragic, and being human, his main ideas are that what it takes to be tragic varies over time historically and that what makes an organism human varies across different stages of its ontogenetic development. He hence points to two ways in which essences may be dynamic, that is, subject to change. The current paper takes Geiger's view seriously and assumes that it poses an explanatory challenge for the, then and now, standard view that essences are 'Platonic', i.e. cannot be subject to change. In the first part of the paper, I introduce Geiger's view and a bit of its historical context, in the second, I formulate the challenge it poses to the standard 'platonic' view of essence. In the second part, I first discuss how this challenge can be met by a contemporary view of essence discussing three potential responses. The first relies on a notion of relativized essence, the second on the distinction between determinables and determinates, the third and last one on multidimensional properties. Finally, I argue that the last of these three proposals may be preferable to the other two.

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## 1 Introduction

Moritz Geiger was a member of the Munich circle, a group of early phenomenologists who first assembled around Theodor Lipps and Johannes Daubert at the University of Munich around the turn of the 19th century, and who remained committed to a realist approach to phenomenology even after Husserl's turn to transcendental philosophy. Geiger is best known for his papers in aesthetics, some of which are collected in the 1928 volume 'Zugänge zur Ästhetik' (Geiger (1928b)), but also published monographs in the philosophy of mathematics (Geiger (1924)) and about philosophical presuppositions in the sciences (Geiger (1930)). Unlike fellow Phenomenologists like Hering and Ingarden (Hering (1921), Ingarden (1925)), he did not publish any work specifically dedicated to the study of essence. Still, in one of his papers in aesthetics, he proposes an interesting and highly unorthodox view which questions the orthodox view about this topic. I want to begin by briefly introducing some elements of this paper which play into this unorthodox view.

The paper in question is 'Phänomenologische Ästhetik' (Geiger (1928a)), which was given in Berlin at the 'Zweiter Kongress für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft' in 1924. Geiger's main aim in this address was to argue for the independence of aesthetics as a discipline, conceived from a phenomenologist perspective, from both psychology, more specifically, the psychology of aesthetic experiences, and the history of art.

Crucial to Geiger's argument is a particular view of phenomenology which is forcefully expressed by the philosopher who, according to several other member of the Munich circle, was, instead of Husserl, their real teacher of phenomenology,<sup>1</sup> Adolf Reinach. In his programmatic address 'Über Phänomenologie' (Reinach (1914)), Reinach leaves no doubt about the central role which essence is supposed to play in (phenomenological) philosophy. Reinach considers it a central task for philosophy to illustrate 'laws of essence in their purity.' (See Reinach (1914), p. 543.) Indeed, 'Über Phänomenologie' closes with an appeal to all philosophers to unify their efforts and to start working in the phenomenological paradigm, instead of imitating the natural sciences. This, Reinach thought, would enable philosophy to finally become a strict science (see Reinach (1914), 550), a science which is very much centred around essence.

In his address, Geiger more or less directly translates this attitude to aesthetics. According to him, the phenomenologist aesthetician 'is interested in general structures, not particular objects. And furthermore in general laws of the aesthetic values, in the principled way in which it finds its basis in aesthetic objects.'<sup>2</sup> Let me expand a bit on

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<sup>1</sup>See Salice (2020), sec. 1.

<sup>2</sup>'Für allgemeine Strukturen interessiert er sich, nicht für einzelne Gegenstände. Und daneben für die

four central elements of Geiger's phenomenological aesthetics highlighted in this quote, starting with the notion of an aesthetic object.

Like other phenomenological aestheticians, perhaps most famously Ingarden (1965), Geiger assumes that there are specific aesthetic objects.<sup>3</sup> Aesthetic objects are objects depicted by an artwork, as they are depicted. They are 'given as phenomena'.

To illustrate this, consider for example Van Gogh's famous late painting 'Wheatfield with Crows'. Realist phenomenologists like Geiger insist that when we engage with this artwork as an artwork, the aesthetic object has to be distinguished from the 'real' object of a double square canvas of roughly 50 cm by 100 cm, covered by different shades of oil paint. The complex aesthetic object is also not to be confused with the sensations of colours and textures which the painting causes in us, i.e. the sensible experiences of the painting. Likewise, the subject of the painting, the real wheat field and crows which van Gogh painted in 1890 and which is depicted by the painting, is not the aesthetic object. Rather, the object with which we engage in the context of an aesthetic experience is the *depicted* landscape, i.e. the Landscape *as* it appears in the painting. Aesthetic objects are objects which exist *according to an artwork*, they have the 'character of reality' within the artwork, as Ingarden describes it (see Ingarden (1965), p. 233).

Second, aesthetic values play a crucial role in Geiger's view of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline. As the above quote makes explicit, Geiger thinks that aesthetics is concerned with general laws of aesthetic values and the principled way in which they are grounded in aesthetic objects. This focus allows aesthetics in Geiger's sense to distinguish itself as an autonomous discipline from the psychology of aesthetic experiences (or more generally of perception) on the one, and the history of art on the other side. The 'general laws' he refers to are nothing else than laws of essence, laws which capture essential connections between aesthetic objects and aesthetic values. Essential laws of this kind are not the focus of the two other disciplines, which are mainly concerned with questions about aesthetic perception and historical questions about art respectively.

Importantly, such laws are, just like the laws studied by the natural sciences, universal. They are about aesthetic objects of *a certain kind* and apply to all objects of this kind, but they are not *about any such object in particular*. This directly points to the third aspect of Geiger's view highlighted in the quote: Aesthetics is concerned with

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allgemeinen Gesetzmäßigkeiten der ästhetischen Werte, für die prinzipielle Art, wie sie in ästhetischen Gegenständen ihr Fundament finden.' (Geiger (1928a), p. 143.)

<sup>3</sup>Geiger's view is in this respect very similar to that of Conrad (see Conrad (1908a,b, 1909)), who takes the objects of aesthetics to be ideal objects. Conrad's discussion of phenomenological aesthetics precedes Geiger's by more than a decade, but differs importantly from it in its approach. Conrad stays closer to Husserl, whereas Geiger pursues a decidedly Reinachian approach.

universal structures ('allgemeine Strukturen') i.e. general aesthetic kinds like the ballad, the symphony, different kinds of drawings, of dance. (see Geiger (1928a), p. 143.) The important general assumption in the background is that the notion of essence Geiger is interested in here is not an individual notion in the sense of a haecceity which distinguishes a *particular* object from others. His discussion of essence in particular focuses on the essence of the tragic, a generic essence, or, if one admits properties or kinds, an essence of a property of aesthetic objects, or of an aesthetic kind to which particular artworks may or may not belong.

Fourth, Geiger assumes that we can gain knowledge of essences through intuition and explicitly alludes to Husserl's idea that we can grasp the essences of kinds of things by varying them in our imagination (cf. Husserl (1939), §86).<sup>4</sup> Geiger stresses that gaining knowledge of essence this way requires skill, practice, and substantial preparation on the side of the subject, which, and this is the main thing Geiger adds to what is otherwise textbook Phenomenological epistemology of essence, in case of the tragic (and in case of other essences that he deemed dynamic) includes sufficient (art-)historical knowledge.

The realist view about aesthetic objects, the focus on aesthetic values, on laws of essence pertaining to general aesthetic kinds, and a phenomenological intuition and imagination-based epistemology of essence are preconditions for Geiger's controversial view that there are dynamic essences. They do, however, not entail it. To argue for his view, Geiger mainly relies on two suggestive examples, which I will now turn to.

### 1.1 The dynamic essence of the tragic

His first example is the tragic. Geiger's argument that the essence of the tragic is dynamic consists of a negative part, in which he draws attention to the fact that the tragic poses certain problems regarding the way in which we, according to the Phenomenologists, may grasp essences, and a positive part, which aims to make it plausible that the dynamicity of certain essences is a real metaphysical feature of them.

The negative part of the argument again consists of two claims. First, the claim that we cannot grasp the essence of the tragic by considering just one single tragedy or tragic artwork. This observation is motivated contrastively: Geiger argues that the essential properties of a geometric figure can be grasped by inspecting any arbitrary instance of the figure. What e.g. a triangle in an Euclidean plane is, is not subject to change across time. It doesn't matter which triangle at which point in time we consider,

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<sup>4</sup>'Man wird das dramatische Geschehen gedanklich variieren müssen, um die Wesensmomente des Tragischen aufzufinden.' (Geiger (1928a), p. 147.)

that Euclidean triangle will always have inner angles which add up to 180 degrees.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, we cannot grasp the essence of the tragic by inspecting only one tragic artwork or only tragic artworks from the same period and culture. If we were to do this, we would risk confusing ‘contingent and temporary’ with ‘essential and universal’ properties of the tragic. (See Geiger (1928a), p. 147.) In other words, we would commit something akin to a fallacy of overgeneralization based on insufficient data.<sup>6</sup>

The second negative claim concerns a related problem, which is due to possible confusions arising from the ambiguous and changing way we speak about the tragic. The word ‘tragic’ may after all have referred to genuinely different phenomena with different essences at different times. It is a substantial question, one to be addressed by Phenomenological aestheticians according to Geiger, whether this is indeed the case, or whether the word instead constantly referred to the same kind in different historical contexts. (See Geiger (1928a), p. 147.)

Geiger outlines his positive view in a passage, which is worth quoting in full, taking the Platonic view of the essence of the tragic he then proceeds to reject as a starting point:

As the ever same essence of the triangle concretizes itself in particular triangles of wholly different side lengths, the ever same essence of the tragic (or the ever same essences of the different modifications of the tragic) concretize themselves in all kinds of forms in Sophocles, in Shakespeare, in Racine, in Schiller, etc. It is the *platonian Idea* which was the patron for that conception of essence, and in Plato, as well as in Phenomenology, the model of mathematics with its ahistoric concepts was crucial for the formation of the concept of essence.

But coming from this conception of essence, one cannot arrive at an understanding of a real historic development. The development of the tragic in Shakespeare, for example from the superficialities of the early tragedies via *Romeo and Juliet* to *King Lear*, is more than a mere jump from one conception of the tragic to another, and more than a merely changing concretization of the ever same essence, even though both surely play a certain role. However, real development is something else – something which one

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<sup>5</sup>Geiger’s original example is that two non-parallel lines in a plane intersect in exactly one point (See Geiger (1928a), p. 145). The example clearly assumes a Euclidean geometry without making it explicit.

<sup>6</sup>Note that this is not to say that Geiger thought that the methodology of phenomenological aesthetics is based on inductive reasoning. He rather takes it to be neither inductive, nor deductive. See Geiger (1928a), pp. 144–6.

cannot approach with a *static* concept of essence, which has its origin in mathematics, one rather needs a *dynamic* concept. A biological example may elucidate this: The baby, the youth, the adult, the elderly man, can all certainly be seen as embodiments of the ever same essence of man, since they are after all all men; but is this to say the really decisive thing? Don't we have to use a concept of essence which takes the essence of man itself to be something which is unfolding, something which develops itself? Correspondingly, one cannot do justice to the development of the tragic if one uncovers the ever same essence of the tragic – the tragic itself has to be seen as capable of change, of inner reconfiguration, of development. One can only understand its development, once one has fluidified the essence of the tragic in this way – the concept of essence only then becomes a tool of historical reflection. The Platonic Idea, the rigid Platonic conception of essence is fundamental for the science of aesthetic principles. If the findings of aesthetics are however to be made fruitful for the reflection of historical development, a softening of the Platonic Idea through the addition of Hegelian Spirit is called for.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Wie sich das immer gleiche Wesen des Dreiecks in einzelnen Dreiecken von ganz verschiedenen Seitenlängen konkretisiert, so konkretisiert sich das immer gleiche Wesen des Tragischen (oder die immer gleichen Wesen der verschiedenen Modifikationen des Tragischen) in den verschiedensten Formen bei Sophokles, bei Shakespeare, bei Racine, bei Schiller usw. Es ist die *platonische Idee*, die dieser Konzeption des Wesens Pate gestanden hat, und bei Plato wie bei der Phänomenologie war das Vorbild der Mathematik mit ihren ahistorischen Begriffen ausschlaggebend für die Formung des Wesensbegriffs.

Aber von dieser Auffassung des Wesens her gelangt man nicht zu einem Verständnis einer wirklichen historischen Entwicklung. Die Entwicklung des Tragischen bei Shakespeare, etwa von den Äußerlichkeiten der frühen Tragödien über Romeo und Julia zu König Lear, ist mehr als ein bloßer Sprung von einer Auffassung des Tragischen zu einer anderen, und mehr als bloße wechselnde Konkretisierung des immer gleichen Wesens des Tragischen, obwohl beides gewiß eine Rolle spielt. Allein wirkliche Entwicklung ist etwas anderes – etwas, dem man nicht mit einem *statischen* Wesensbegriff nahe kommen kann, der in der Mathematik seinen Ursprung hat, sondern nur mit einem *dynamischen*. Ein biologisches Beispiel möge das verdeutlichen: Das Wickelkind, der Jüngling, der reife Mann, der Greis lassen sich alle gewiß als Ausgestaltungen des stets gleichen Wesens des Menschen auffassen, da sie ja alle Menschen sind; aber ist damit wirklich das Entscheidende gesagt? Muß hier nicht ein Wesensbegriff verwandt werden, der das Wesen des Menschen selbst als ein sich Entfaltendes, als ein sich Entwickelndes faßt? Entsprechend kann man der Entwicklung des Tragischen nicht gerecht werden, wenn man nur das immergleiche Wesen des Tragischen herauschält – das Tragische selbst muß als der Veränderung, der inneren Umgestaltung, der Entwicklung fähig angesehen werden. Erst wenn man das Wesen des Tragischen in dieser Weise flüssig gemacht hat, kann man die Entwicklung des Tragischen verstehen – erst dann wird der Wesensbegriff zum Hilfsmittel der historischen Betrachtung. Die platonische Idee, die starr platonische Auffassung des Wesens ist grundlegend für die ästhetische Prinzipienwissenschaft. Sollen jedoch die Ergebnisse der Ästhetik fruchtbar gemacht werden für die Betrachtung der geschichtlichen Entwicklung, so bedarf es einer Erweichung der platonischen Idee durch einen Zusatz Hegelschen Geistes. (Geiger (1928a), p. 149-50; letterspacing replaced by italics.)

The passage contains both an argument for and a characterization of a dynamic conception of the tragic. My aim now will be to give a charitable interpretation of both; a critical discussion will follow later.

I take the argument expressed in the passage to be the following: To understand the historical development of the tragic, we need a conception of essence which is able to account for this development. According to the standard, Platonic conception, the different stages of this development would correspond to different concretizations of the same (Platonic) essence. But they are not, so a different, inherently dynamic conception of essence is needed.

The impetus of this argument is obviously Geiger's conviction that the essence-based Phenomenological method can lead to important insights in aesthetics and that the Platonist approach unduly limits its scope of application in this context. Platonist essences in Geiger's sense are absolutely general, i.e. they characterize anything tragic whatsoever as tragic, no matter in which historical circumstances. Geiger's thought seems to be that this excludes characteristics which made, make, or will make artworks tragic but do so specifically during certain periods of time, and not during others. The introduction of a dynamic essence of the tragic, i.e. of a conception of essence which allows for change in the characteristic properties which make something tragic, would then allow one to overcome this limitation, adapting the Phenomenological methodology to a context where the ability to capture historical developments is at least as important as that to uncover eternal, absolutely general truths.

The argument, reconstructed as above, obviously leaves friends of Platonic essence room to defend their position. Not only because it heavily appeals to intuition, but also because it is abductive, i.e. based on an inference to the best explanation. Since it has this form, the argument can be resisted by providing a better alternative explanation. In the current context, such a better explanation could consist in a view of essence which can accommodate the historical development of the tragic without giving up on a Platonic notion of essence. To foreshadow, the systematic discussion in section 3 will focus on three proposals which attempt just that.

Let me now move on to the characterization of dynamic essence Geiger provides in the passage. It consists of four main claims. First, dynamic essences are not just clusters of concretizations of the same Platonic essence. Plausibly, 'concretization' here can be taken to mean the same as 'instantiation'. While this still leaves it somewhat open what exactly Geiger meant, I will take him to mean that the quality of being tragic cannot correspond to a unique property, or perhaps a unique set of properties, which is instantiated by every tragic artwork at every stage of art history in which tragedies were

produced.

Second, the essence of the tragic is analogous to the essence of a human being as it undergoes its ontogenetic development. I will discuss this second part of the characterization in more detail in the following subsection.

Third, the essence of the tragic has to mirror the historical development of the tragic. To understand this claim, it is important to recall two of Geiger's assumptions, namely realism about aesthetic objects and the idea that the essence of the tragic is not the essence of a particular, but a generic essence, the essence of a property. Given these assumptions, a natural thought is that all the tragic aesthetic objects are tragic because they have the same property, or set of properties, which makes them tragic and that this property, or set of properties, derives from (perhaps partly trivially by being identical to parts of) the essence of the tragic. One might hence take Geiger's thought to be that if tragic artworks are tragic in virtue of having different tragedy-inducing properties in different eras, then the essence of the tragic cannot just consist in a static, monolithic property or set of properties. Instead, it has to be in some sense sensible to the different art-historical contexts, enabling it to somehow convey different tragedy-inducing properties at different times.

The fourth and last component of Geiger's positive characterization of dynamic essence is an allusion to the Hegelian Spirit. Based on the preceding discussion, it is likely that this (suggestive, but unexplained) reference was meant to underline the idea that the historical changes which the tragic, and, following Geiger, with it its essence, has undergone, and still undergoes, are not random. Rather, Geiger appears to assume that these changes are ordered, directed, and, to refer to his second main example, that just like the predetermined ontogenetic developmental stages which a human being passes through during its life, the tragic undergoes an evolution, a directed process which may amount to a progress towards a goal, mirroring a motif from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (see e.g. Redding (2024), 3.1.1).

Before I proceed to discuss Geiger's other example, it is worth pointing out that Geiger's view was unorthodox, even at his time and among his fellow Phenomenologists. A proper historical investigation is beyond the scope of this paper,<sup>8</sup> but what I can do here is to (very) briefly introduce two contrasting views. First, Scheler's discussion of the tragic, which we find in two papers published in 1914 and 1919 (see Scheler (1914), Scheler (1919)), and second, Hering's discussion of changes of essence (see Hering (1921), §6.).

According to Scheler, it is an essential feature of tragic artworks that they involve

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<sup>8</sup>See Mulligan (2024) for a general historical overview of essence in Phenomenology.

the unavoidable destruction of a positive value through a force which itself exemplifies a positive value. (See e.g. Scheler (1914), pp. 758-9, 762-3.) Crucially, Scheler takes this essential feature of the tragic in art to point to an essential feature of the universe itself, namely that ‘the causal evolution of all things has no regard for the values which appear in it.’ As this is an essential feature of our universe, it is, according to Scheler, also a feature of every (possible) world.<sup>9</sup> This clearly illustrates the ‘Platonic’ nature of Scheler’s view: the tragic reflects a certain, necessarily obtaining law of essence about the relation between values and the causal evolution of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The second view which contrasts with Geiger’s does not concern the tragic, but rather the idea that essences can change. It stems from a paper by Jean Hering which aims to clarify the Phenomenologist conception of essence. Hering (1921) contains a paragraph (§6) which explicitly discusses the question of whether essences can change. There, Hering distinguishes accidental and essential properties of objects and, surprisingly, takes the individual essences of temporal objects to be capable of change. His example is that of a house which can change accidental properties like its colour, but can, according to Hering, also change properties which are essential to it in the sense that they make it the particular house that it is. The point of mentioning this is just that even Hering, who is evidently open to admit that essences can be dynamic in some sense, still explicitly denied that the essences of atemporal objects, a category in which he explicitly includes properties, can change. (See Hering (1921), p. 505.)

It is worth stressing that Geiger’s view, despite being unconventional, is a priori consistent with the idea that some aspects of the essence of the tragic are necessary and unchanging. It challenges the view that the essence of the tragic *as a whole* is unchanging and necessarily exhibited by any tragic artwork whatsoever, but, for all Geiger says, allows for the tragic to have an essence, which may partly change, but at the same time partly remain constant over time.

## 1.2 The dynamic essence of being human

Geiger crucially draws on an analogy between the progression of a human being through the different phases of its life and the tragic in order to illustrate his idea that the tragic

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<sup>9</sup>‘Es ist ein Wesensmerkmal unserer Welt, – und da ein »Wesensmerkmal« – auch jeder Welt, daß der kausale Verlauf der Dinge auf die in ihm erscheinenden Werte keine Rücksicht nimmt, daß die Forderungen, welche die Werte aus sich heraus stellen an Einheitsbildungen, oder an Fortgang einer Entfaltung und Entwicklung des Geschehens in der Richtung auf ein Ideal, dem Kausalverlauf gegenüber, – wie nicht vorhanden sind.’ (Scheler (1914), p. 765.)

<sup>10</sup>Note that, as Waldenfels (1975) points out, Scheler had a general conception of essence, according to which essences are intrinsically closed (‘abgeschlossen’), which by itself seems to already imply that they cannot vary or be subject to change.

has a dynamic essence. He does not further elaborate on this analogy, but rather seems to solely trust its suggestive power.

On the one hand, taken together with Geiger's reference to Hegel, it does manage to convey the idea of the historical development of the tragic as an evolution, a directed, or at least, systematic, perhaps predetermined process. On the other hand, there is an important difference in what undergoes this process of change, which clearly distinguishes this second from the first example which it is supposed to illustrate.

In case of the human being, the developmental phases mentioned by Geiger (The baby, the youth, the adult, the elderly man) are ontogenetic; they are phases in the development of an individual. If the example is to illustrate, as Geiger intends, the need to posit a dynamic essence of being human, then its dynamicity must obviously in some sense reflect, or perhaps determine, the different, changing properties which make a human being a human being at different stages of its ontogenetic development. Suitable examples of properties of this kind may be the abilities to procreate via sexual reproduction, or to exercise certain higher cognitive functions, abilities which humans typically first acquire and then lose again during their life. One may well claim that having such an ability is, during the relevant phase of ontogenetic development, at least part of what makes the individual a human being, i.e. part of its kind essence.

In contrast, the supposed requirement to posit a dynamic essence of the tragic cannot plausibly concern the development of a particular artwork, contrary to what the biological example suggests if one takes it to be strictly analogous. Geiger's listing of tragic authors from different epochs makes it perfectly clear that the relevant change in case of the tragic is not that of properties of one and the same particular tragic artwork at different times, but rather a change concerning properties of different tragic artworks stemming from different epochs. Perhaps one could again appeal to a Hegelian motif, that there are certain parallels between individual conscious development and an evolutionary development of an objective absolute Spirit, in order to address this mismatch between the two examples, but I am not qualified to further explore this idea.

What I will rather do is to propose a different, but also charitable reading of Geiger: He might very well have overlooked an important difference between the two examples. However, his analogy still manages to point to an important respect of similarity between two distinct kinds of dynamic essences, that of a particular belonging to a kind and that of a kind itself, namely that they both have to reflect progressive (or perhaps regressive, or partly progressive and regressive) developments which naturally divide into different phases.

## 2 A Geigerian challenge to contemporary Essentialism

### 2.1 The challenge described

Like the Phenomenologists of Geiger's time, current Essentialists predominantly work with a Platonic notion of essence. There are two contemporary standard views of essence, the modal view, according to which essence is identified with metaphysical necessity, and Fine's opposing Neo-Aristotelian view (see e.g. Fine (1994, 2015)), according to which essence is treated as a primitive notion which in turn can be used to define modal notions such as metaphysical necessity. I combined with the view that things belong to kinds, both of these views share a commitment to an idea captured by the following principle:

NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION Any object which belongs to a particular kind necessarily has the same characteristic properties (i.e. the properties which make it an object of that kind).

This principle directly conflicts with Geiger's two examples of dynamic essences. In case of the tragic, it makes sense to elaborate on one of his illustrative examples in order to illustrate the conflict. The claim I want to discuss is that if the essence of the tragic is Platonic, then Shakespeare's development as a tragic author cannot be captured by a Platonic conception of essence. Let me in particular focus on one factor which contributes to making Shakespeare's first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, and his late masterpiece *King Lear* tragic, namely the cause of the fates of their eponymous main characters.

Titus causes a certain course of events which ends tragically by adhering to common Roman custom by having Alarbus, the son of his beaten adversary Tamora ritually killed to avenge the deaths of his own sons in battle. Lear in contrast causes his own demise by giving the two halves of his kingdom to his two unfaithful daughters Goneril and Regan and by disinheriting his faithful daughter Cordelia, since she was unable to flatter his ego by professing that she loved him more than her sisters.

Both Titus and Lear cause their own downfall, but in a certain sense, Titus did so blamelessly by adhering to Roman customs, while Lear is clearly to blame for his action, since he followed a vicious impulse due to his own vanity. In both cases, the moral status of the action of the main character arguably is part of what makes the play tragic, i.e. part of the properties which the play necessarily has as a tragedy. Since the moral status however differs (faultlessly causing one's own demise vs. doing so at a fault), this amounts to a violation of NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION.

Concerning Geiger's second example, that of the ontogenetic development of a human being, the conflict can be illustrated focusing again on the ability of being able to sexually reproduce with other members of the species, an ability which is typically part of what makes an adult member of the species, but which any individual which has it lacked in its early developmental stages, and will again lack at a more advanced age. Again, NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION is violated, this time since one and the same member of a kind has and lacks a characteristic property typically had by members of the kind at different stages of its development.

## 2.2 Can the challenge be dismissed out of hand?

NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION, or an equivalent principle formulated in the preferred language of the respective view, is an important part of contemporary Essentialist views. Simply giving up the principle seems to be out of the question, but can the challenge perhaps be dismissed without directly engaging with Geiger's claims? I will now briefly discuss, and reject, one potential response of this sort.

Considering the persistent reliance on the same small set of by now well-worn examples of essential properties and truths (think of the singleton Socrates example!), Geiger's example of the tragic seem rather exotic. This may be taken to suggest that one could completely avoid Geiger's challenge by arguing that the tragic is not a natural kind, or that *being tragic* is not a fundamental property and by then insisting that Essentialism is only concerned with the natural or fundamental. I.e. one could restrict the domain of things to which NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION applies and argue that putative counterexamples are really outside of its domain of application.<sup>11</sup>

This strategy seems problematic for two reasons. First, there is an inherent danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, putting a potentially large range of similar kinds outside the range of Essentialist views. This danger should be taken seriously. As already pointed out, contemporary metaphysicians tend to focus on a very narrow class of often highly abstract examples and to further restrict the possible range of application of their framework could lead to its general marginalization. Geiger's two examples also stand for a more general class of examples, so somehow ruling out being human and being tragic would not be enough. If Geiger is right about the tragic and being human, then one can make the exact same cases for the dynamicity of the essence of e.g. the

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<sup>11</sup>Hale applies a strategy of this kind in Hale (2013), §11.3.5. He draws a distinction between pure and other kinds of sortal predicates and argues that only the former refer to genuine kinds, putting whatever 'impure' sortal predicates stand for outside the scope of Essentialist principles like NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION.

comic, the epic, and membership in different plant and animal species. And if one takes the idea of essence's having to do justice to a real historical development seriously, one may also have to account for properties like being beautiful, noble, persistent, yet changing social entities like languages or cultures, and perhaps repeatable events like annual sports tournaments.

The second problem with the strategy is that being human is a standard example of an essential property, so somehow disqualifying it from being subject to core Essentialist principles like NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION seems almost out of the question. While some Essentialists may be prepared to deny that the tragic is a kind which has an essence, it is unlikely that many would happily do the same for being human. The strategy to block the challenge by arguing that the examples fall outside the scope of Essentialist views is hence problematic, so Essentialists should have a better response ready.

### **3 Meeting the challenge: Platonic, complex essences**

If they cannot dismiss the challenge out of hand, how should Essentialists respond? In this last section of the paper, I want to propose and discuss three response strategies, which, on the one hand, take seriously Geiger's point that the essences of historical kinds and developing particulars do not easily fit into Essentialist thinking, but still retain an orthodox, Platonic notion of essence.

While all three proposals are orthodox in this important respect, they are unorthodox in others. Indeed, each one relies on non-standard metaphysical ideology which may be subject to criticism. I believe that these costs are low enough to give Essentialists workable responses to the challenge and I will in particular suggest that one of the three proposals has, compared to the other two, benefits which may make it preferable.

As the last sentence already makes clear, this section relies on a cost-benefit analysis of the three discussed proposals. Let me briefly comment on the standards I will assume to weigh their costs and benefits. The by far most important criterion will be the ability to provide a coherent account of Geiger's two examples which both does justice to idea underlying his call for a dynamic conception of essence while still keeping the notion of essence Platonic by at least retaining NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION, or an equivalent principle. I will assume that any response to the challenge which manages to meet this criterion counts as adequate, but will also assume that further criteria may allow us to further differentiate between adequate responses.

### 3.1 Relativized Essence

The first proposal relies on a non-standard view of essence due to Hirèche (2022). Hirèche works with a broadly Finean view of essence<sup>12</sup>, which admits two different notions of essence. First, the regular, unrelativized notion and second, a notion of relativized essence. The latter notion allows one to account for essentialist claims which are relativized to a particular parameter, where parameters may include contexts of utterance, values, or explanatory frameworks, among other things. (See Hirèche (2022), p. 473.)

Importantly, both notions exist side by side in Hirèche’s framework, so that both absolutely essential truths about objects, as well as truths which are only essential to objects relative to a relativization parameter  $R$  can be accommodated. To give an example, the framework allows for it to be absolutely essential to Socrates that he is the son of Phaenarete, but absolutely accidental to him that he is a philosopher. At the same time, he can be taken to essentially (in the relativized sense) be a philosopher relative to a context of utterance which is focused on his role in Greek society.

Let us now see how Hirèche’s framework may help an Essentialist to address the Geigerian challenge. To begin, recall that a response to the challenge should conserve a Platonic notion of essence and NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION or an equivalent principle. Hirèche’s framework allows us to do both, since the absolute notion it provides meets both criteria.<sup>13</sup>

So how does the proposal handle Geiger’s examples? The main idea is the following: The changes in the properties which make an artwork tragic over time and the changes in the properties which make a particular human being a human being over the course of its ontogenetic development are changes in relativized essence only. Tragic artworks

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<sup>12</sup>Broadly, since it does not rely on Fine’s primitive essentialist notion ‘true in virtue of the nature of ...’ (cf. Fine (1994), but rather on primitive essentialist facts (facts involving essential properties and the objects which they have such as, if the corresponding essential claim is accepted, the fact that *Socrates is human*), which are used together with grounding to define essentialist notions. See Hirèche (2022), §§4-5. Note that I will continue talking about essential properties in this section, even though strictly speaking, Hirèche’s account, just like the Finean account it extends, conceptualizes essences in terms of propositions which express essential truths about objects.

<sup>13</sup>The relativized notion in contrast does so only in a special case, namely relativized to the trivial relativization parameter  $R^T$ , i.e. in case the relativization is effectively not a relativization at all: For any (plurality of) objects  $xx$  and any proposition  $p$ ,  $p$  expresses an absolutely essential truth about  $xx$  if, and only, if it expresses a (relativized) essential truth about  $xx$  relative to  $R^T$ . For any non-trivial relativization parameter, the two notions of essence come apart. In such cases, there is a  $R$  such that relative to  $R$ , some objects have a property essentially, but that property is not absolutely essential to them. Whether NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION still applies to the relativized notion of essence depends on whether kinds can be associated with relativized essential properties. In theory one could insist that they cannot. This move would amount to a more complicated variant of the restriction strategy to dismiss the challenge discussed in the previous section. We need not further discuss this possibility, since it undermines the basic idea of the response I want to propose now.

throughout history and human organisms throughout their ontogenetic development retain their absolutely essential properties, so NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION is satisfied with respect to them. Yet, the essences of kinds also reflect historical and ontogenetic changes, since the tragic and the individual human being can have different relativized essential properties at different times which constitute what it is to belong to the respective kind at that time, in the sense of being relatively essential to its members with respect to different parameters. This makes this proposal an adequate response to the Geigerian challenge.

So far so good. I will now argue that the first proposal still has at least one problem which somewhat limits its appeal. Relativized essences are, as their name says, always relativized to a (non-trivial) relativization parameter. The main challenge I see for Essentialists who wants to work with this notion to meet the Geigerian challenge is to provide a plausible account of these parameters in the context of Geiger's examples.

The examples of relativization parameters given by Hirèche, contexts of utterance, values, or explanatory frameworks, are all, in a seemingly robust sense, extrinsic to the things which have the relativized essences in relation to them. The question I want to raise now is whether the relativization factors can be taken to be extrinsic in case of the suggested application to the two examples Geiger provides.

In case of the kind essence of the tragic, it seems plausible to assume that extrinsic factors are largely responsible for its change. These changes are *historical* and historical changes always involve, or are at least tied to, factors which are extrinsic to particular objects affected by them, including e.g. cultural, economic, or ecological factors. Are there also factors which influence the development of the tragic, but are intrinsic to the tragic itself? Perhaps this is part of what Geiger had in mind when referring to Hegel, but it is hard to tell, since he did not elaborate this point.

Be that as it may, in case of the ontogenetic development of a particular human organism, the changes it undergoes are crucially determined by factors intrinsic to the individual, such as the genetic information carried by its DNA. Extrinsic factors of course also play a role, e.g. without the right kind of environment, the individual could not undergo any ontogenetic development, but these factors mostly enable, but do not determine, at least not by themselves, the particular changes which are part of this development.

It is not clear how one could account for these complex interactions between intrinsic and extrinsic factors in Hirèche's framework, if relativization factors are purely external. But can it admit internal relativization factors? I will not attempt to answer this question, but just give an indication of why I think it is not trivial to answer. The

notion of relativized essence is clearly modelled on context-dependent notions familiar from other contexts, think e.g. of context-dependent expressions in natural language like ‘large’, whose meaning in an utterance change depending on the context in which it that utterance is made. Relativizations to intrinsic factors seem to be distinctively different, since it seems that the trigger for the change they indicate must also be intrinsic. This however suggests that it is context-independent, which means that the model provided by familiar instances of context-dependence no longer applies. Following this line of thought, one is quickly led to difficult questions about the nature of change.

As it stands, the framework seems best adapted to purely external relativization factors, keeping the notions of absolute and relativized essence neatly separated. But this only seems to emphasize the apparent mismatch with the way the Platonic and dynamic parts of kind essences plausibly interact in at least the second of Geiger’s examples.

My point here is not that this is an insurmountable difficulty. Perhaps there are ways to avoid, or at least to side-step the problem. Still, the preceding discussion underlines that proponents of the first proposal have substantial philosophical questions to answer, if they want to rely on relativized essence in their response to the Geigerian challenge.

### 3.2 Determinables/determinates

The second proposal I wish to discuss relies on the distinction between determinable and determinate properties. (See e.g. Wilson (2017), Funkhouser (2014).) The core idea behind this distinction is that a properties may be intrinsically related to others via a relation of determination, where being so related ensures that an object which has one of the latter properties necessarily also has the former property.

To illustrate this idea, let us consider a classic example, colours. Take the colour red. *Being red* is a determinable property since it stands in the determination relation to its determinates *being scarlet*, *being carmine*, *being bordeaux*, etc. The intrinsic connection between determinable and their determinate properties manifests itself in an asymmetric pattern of necessary co-instantiation. Any object which has one of the determinates of *being red* (*being scarlet*, *being carmine*, *being bordeaux*,...) thereby also has the corresponding determinable property of being red. On the other hand, that an object is red implies that the object has *one* of the determinates of this determinable, but importantly not which one.

How can an Essentialist use this distinction to respond to the Geigerian challenge? By claiming that a) characteristic essential properties of kinds like the tragic and *being human* consist of determinable properties and b) that which of the determinates of these determinates a member of the kind has may change over time. The essences of kinds are

hence Platonic, in the sense that they satisfy NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION on the level of the determinable properties that they confer to their members. Changes in the characteristic essential properties are then considered to be changes which happen only on the level of the determinates of these determinables.

So with respect to the tragic, the idea is that the kind essence of the tragic consists of certain determinable properties and that it may have different determinates of these properties in different historical contexts. In case of the Shakespeare-example from section 2, these characteristic essential properties include the determinable property of *containing a main character who causes their own downfall*. In the historically earlier context, this determinable property would be co-instantiated with its determinate *containing a main character who **faultlessly** causes their own downfall* by the play *Titus Andronicus*. In the historically later context, the same determinable would instead be co-instantiated with its distinct determinate *containing a main character who **by their own fault** causes their own downfall* by *King Lear*. These distinct determinate properties can then be said to contribute to making these plays tragic at different times, making them essential to being tragic in an indirect sense via their intrinsic relation to their corresponding determinable property, which is essential to and directly constitutive of the kind of being tragic.

Analogously, the organism in the biological example essentially has the determinable property of *being human* throughout all stages of its ontogenetic development, but instantiates different determinates of that property (*being an infant, being a child, being an adolescent, ...*) at different developmental stages. These different determinate properties then are part of what makes the organism human at their particular developmental stage in virtue of their intrinsic connection to their determinable, making them indirectly essential.

The second proposal is also adequate in that it manages to both accommodate Geigerian intuitions about historical and ontogenetic changes and to uphold NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION for determinable essential properties. A potential problem for this proposal is that it may not be best adapted to account for Geiger's Hegelian idea that the changes which a kind member (and by his light also its essence) undergoes may follow a certain determined path, i.e. the idea that these changes are not arbitrary, but part of a directed evolution.

In particular, it does not seem to allow one to capture the idea that e.g. the development of the tragic may, during a certain period of time, amount to a refinement, in the sense that the tragic comes more and more into itself during that period. This seems to be a problem, since there is a clear sense in which *King Lear* is a more refined, a better

tragedy than *Titus Andronicus*. The former is e.g. much less dependent on superficial shock value (Titus at one point kills Chiron and Demetrius, the two sons of his adversary Tamora, bakes cakes containing their heads into two pies and serves them to their unwitting mother who then proceeds to eat them) and focuses more on psychological and social struggle, conflicts and intrigue.

The toolkit of determinable and determinate properties does not lend itself to accommodating the axiological relations between determinate properties needed to accommodate such positive, or negative developments. To see this, one needs to take a closer at the structure it imposes on properties.

Recall that the main idea of the proposal is that the dynamicity Geiger insists on consists in change from one determinate of the same determinable to another. The relation between determinates is an indirect relation which is mediated via a hierarchy of relative determination. In cases of colours for example, *being red* is a determinate of the determinable *being coloured*, but itself has *being scarlet* as one of its determinates, which in turn has different shades of scarlet as determinates. Structurally, the relation between the determinates of the same determinable corresponds to the logical relation between a disjunctive predicate (e.g. ‘is scarlet *or* vermillion *or* crimson *or* ...’) and its disjuncts. Necessarily, something which is scarlet is thereby also coloured, just as ‘*a* is scarlet’ logically implies ‘*a* is red’, if the predicate *is red* is defined as the disjunction of ‘is scarlet’ and all other predicates representing shades of red.

Importantly, there is no sense in which a change from one determinate to another of the same determinable can, on its own, reflect a progress or regress, i.e. a positive or negative development. The relation of determination which holds between determinables and their determinates and which fully characterizes the systematic connection between them is simply not apt to reflect such developments.

It does provide us with a hierarchy of levels of determination, so one might think that it could in some sense be used give us the structure needed to do so. The idea would be that e.g. the refinement in what makes a play tragic visible in the progression from *Titus Andronicus* to *King Lear* might be accounted for by a switch from a lower, to a higher level of determination, where the latter is assumed to mark a stage at which the determinable property of being tragic is more fully realized.

However, switches between levels of determination cannot do this explanatory work. It is standardly assumed that any object which has a determinable, also has a determinate of that determinable at every level of determination.<sup>14</sup> A human organism can accordingly not e.g. be human (determinable) throughout its whole ontogenetic development

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<sup>14</sup>Wilson calls this principle ‘Requisite determination’. See Wilson (2017), §2.1.

and in some sense progress from having the lower level ('lower' in the sense of being at a level of determination which is further down the hierarchy with the determinable as the top element) determinate *being a child* to the higher level determinate *being an adult*. This is simply ruled out on the standard view, since the organism has all the determinates of the determinable whenever it has the latter, which annihilates the purported hierarchical difference which one might have hoped to exploit. Generally speaking, this approach arguably misuses the toolkit provided by the framework, since the relation of determination does not track whether an object is somehow better or worse in having a determinable property. What it does track is an increase or decrease in specificity, but this is a change of a completely different nature.

To sum up the previous discussion, the distinction between determinables and determinates can be used to formulate a response to the Geigerian challenge which is adequate in that it can accommodate the idea that essences conform to NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION (determinable essential properties do) and can make sense of the idea that the essences of the tragic and of being human involve a certain dynamicity (the determinable properties which members of these kinds characteristically have are had by them necessarily, i.e. at all times of their existence, but these individual kind-members may have different determinates of these determinables at different times). However, if one wants to also accommodate Geiger's idea that dynamic essences reflect not mere changes, but directed evolutionary developments, then this second proposal may not be the best to settle for.

### 3.3 Multidimensional properties

Like the second proposal, the third crucially relies on a particular kind of complex properties, multidimensional properties. So far, multidimensional properties have played a less prominent role in contemporary metaphysics than determinable properties. They have previously been used to explain the truth of certain kinds of degree-involving sentences (see van Woudenberg and Peels (2018)) and to account for the idea that certain qualities can be had to a lower or higher degree (see Calosi and Michels (2024)). These are, to the best of my knowledge, the only systematic discussions of such properties in the current literature.

To introduce multidimensional properties, let me begin with an example, the property of being wise. Arguably, different people can be wise in very different ways. Socrates was wise by being an excellent interlocutor, Aristotle by being at the forefront of the sciences of his time, Xenophanes by being a brilliant critic and satirist, etc. It seems that there is an intrinsic connection between these different ways in which these and

other wise persons were wise and the more general quality of being overall wise. The core idea of the framework of multidimensional properties is that this connection consists in an intrinsic relation between a multidimensional property, that of being wise in this case, and a set of properties, the *aspects* of the multidimensional property, in this case e.g. *being an excellent interlocutor, being a brilliant scientist, being a brilliant critic and satirist*, which in some sense constitute the multidimensional property. This framework then allows objects to have different sets of aspects of a multidimensional property at different times, corresponding to qualitatively different complex ways in which they have the property.<sup>15</sup>

The idea for how such properties can help an essentialist address the Geigerian challenge is structurally the same as that at work in the second proposal: Things belonging to a kind have the same multidimensional property characteristic of the kind throughout the whole duration of their existence. NECESSARY CHARACTERIZATION is accordingly satisfied by the multidimensional properties they have essentially. The historical and ontogenetic changes over time which Geiger takes to be reflected by dynamic essences, are then taken to be changes in the set of aspects of multidimensional properties which the relevant objects have, i.e. in the complex ways in which these properties are had by them.

Applied to the first example, both *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear* essentially have the multidimensional property of being tragic, but the two plays differ in which of the aspects of this property they have. This in particular includes *having a main character who faultlessly causes their own downfall*, which *Titus Andronicus* has and *King Lear* lacks, and *having a main character who causes their own downfall by their own fault*, which *Titus Andronicus* lacks and *King Lear* has. Applied to the second example, the human organism has the multidimensional property of being human over the whole duration of its existence, but it has different (sets) of that property's aspects at different times of its development. The proposal is hence adequate in the sense that it keeps the essences Platonic, but can still accommodate Geiger's insight that some essences in a certain sense reflect changes at a historic or individual level.

Calosi and Michels (2024), §§3.5, 4 point out an important characteristic of multidimensional properties which one can exploit to furthermore accommodate Geiger's 'addition of Hegelian Spirit', i.e. his idea that the dynamic changes of things of a partic-

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<sup>15</sup>Note that this relates to an important difference to determinable properties. Objects may have qualitatively different determinates of the same determinable, but having any one of these determinates is in itself sufficient for having the determinable. In contrast, having a single aspect of a multidimensional property may not on its own be sufficient to have the multidimensional property, at least not *simpliciter* or *fully*. Cf. van Woudenberg and Peels (2018), p. 53 and Calosi and Michels (2024), §4.

ular kind are part of a directed development. The characteristic in question is that the intrinsic structure of multidimensional properties permits one to define different modes of having them. Such properties are not just *had* or *not had* by an object, *tertium non datur*, like the absolute properties metaphysicians have all too long focused most of their attention on. Rather, objects can have them *partly, fully, simpliciter*, and in particular *to a degree*.

The notion of *having to a degree* gives us a clear sense in which an object can have a multidimensional property more or less, to a higher or lower degree, with a greater or lower strength or intensity. Take for example Socrates and Alcibiades and assume, for the sake of illustration, that Socrates has two wisdom-aspects, that of being an excellent interlocutor and that of being capable of deep insights, while Alcibiades only has one wisdom-aspect, namely that of being able to navigate dangerous situations. Different aspects arguably can have different weight in the sense that having them may contribute more or less to the degree to which the multidimensional property they belong to is had. Let us however for the sake of simplicity assume that having any one of these three aspects contribute about the same towards the degree of being wise. One can then say that in this scenario, Socrates is wiser than Alcibiades, because, assuming more or less equal weights, he has more aspects of wisdom, which together bring him closer to being maximally wise compared to Alcibiades.

This example is of course particularly simple, but it suffices to illustrate how multidimensional properties can be had to a higher or lower degree, depending on how many of the aspects of the property they have and how these aspects together combine to contribute towards having the multidimensional properties. Now let me apply the notion of *having to a degree* to Geiger's examples.

Both *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear* have different sets of aspects of the multidimensional property of being tragic. In order to accommodate the idea that the two plays signify a progress in what it means to be tragic, as Geiger assumes, we can rely on the resulting degrees to which the two have this multidimensional property. The idea is of course that *King Lear* comes closer to the ideal of being a fully realized tragedy than *Titus Andronicus*. This idea can be accounted for in terms of the former having the multidimensional property to a higher degree than latter, because it has a set of aspects of *being tragic* which taken together bring it closer to the ideal of a fully realized tragedy.

The apparatus of multidimensional properties might be less familiar than the distinction between determinables and determinates, but it arguably does better at accommodating Geiger's idea that essences may not only reflect change over time, but furthermore also a genuine, directed development. If one values this idea, then the third proposal

may be a better choice than the second.

Let me close by pointing out that the third proposal can also be argued to have an advantage over the first: It does not mess in any way with the standard notion of essence. Of course, opinions may differ about whether this is more of a cost than adopting an unfamiliar ontology of multidimensional properties, but recall that the target audience here are contemporary Essentialists. To them, adopting a non-standard notion of essence is arguably a more incisive change than adopting a non-standard theory of the nature of some complex properties. This may very well give them a reason to also prefer the third proposal to the first, making it potentially the best overall choice between the three responses to the Geigerian challenge which I have discussed.

### Acknowledgements

To be added

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