*Identity to Essence*

**Abstract**

The idea that a being can be identical to its own essence has a long and venerable history in theological speculation. As with many ideas in theology, however, such an idea has never been given an adequate mathematical formulation. The key to such a formulation, I argue, is introducing an essence axiom into non-well-founded set theory. According to such an axiom, for every set x there is a set that contains all and only those sets that contain x. With such an axiom, it becomes possible to introduce an essence function that takes each set to its essence. An object that is identical to its essence, then, is simply a fixed point of the essence function. In this paper, I first discuss a theorem according to which any fixed point of the essence function is universally symmetrical with respect to the set membership relation. After proving the theorem, I discuss its theological implications. I go on to argue that the process of counting the members of a set that is identical to its essence is a Sisyphusian process. Such a fact I suggest that the absurdity of human existence is not alleviated by the existence of God but rather is entailed by it.

Therefore, the essence of a composite thing is not predicated in every way of the composite thing itself, for we cannot say that a man is his own quiddity. But the essence of a simple thing, which is its form, can only be signified as a whole, for there is nothing there apart from the form, so there is nothing that could receive the form. Therefore, no matter how we consider the essence of a simple substance, it is predicated of the simple substance. This is why Avicenna says that the quiddity of a simple substance is the simple substance itself, for there is nothing else [in the simple substance] to receive it. (Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*)

The concept of identity to essence is a central part of the history of theological speculation. Despite its centrality, however, the notion of identity to essence has not been given an adequate formal articulation. Because it involves the concept of essence, one might naturally think that a formal presentation of the idea would invoke modal concepts. Typically, an essential property as opposed to an accidental property is understood as a property that an object must have in all possible worlds in which it exists. The appearance of modality in such a description is obvious.

There is, however, another understanding of essence in the philosophical tradition that can be given an extensional treatment, namely Leibniz’s idea of a *complete individual concept* (CIC).

The nature of an individual substance or of a complete being is to have a notion so complete that it is sufficient to contain and to allow us to deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed. (A VI iv 1540/AG 41)

Were one to use the language of sets and properties, one could say that a CIC of x is the set that contains all the sets that contain x. Because it is possible to pursue set theory within an extensional framework, it is possible to formulate Leibniz’s idea without appeal to intensions. Moreover, because extensional set-theory is undeniably a part of mathematics, it is thereby possible to provide a *mathematical* analysis of the concept of a CIC, or what I will henceforth generally call an essence, and in turn to provide a mathematical analysis of the concept of identity to essence.

A set theoretic analysis of identity to essence is made possible by introducing the following axiom, what I call the *Essence Axiom*, according to which every set has an essence.

1. .[[1]](#footnote-1)

It follows trivially from extensionality that no set has two essences: for suppose that x contains all and only those sets that contain z and so too does y. Then, x and y contain all the same sets and so are identical. Because every set has an essence and no set has two essences, we can talk about *the* *essence* of some set x. So, let E(x) stand for the essence of x. It follows a little less trivially but still easily that the essence function is 1 to 1:

To see this. suppose x y. Then, there is a set, w, such that either w is a member of x and is not a member of y, or w is a member of y and is not a member of x. Suppose w is a member of x and not of y. Then, by the Essence Axiom, E(w) contains x and not y. Hence, by the Essence Axiom, E(x) contains E(w) and E(y) does not. Hence, by Extensionality, E(x ). Similar reasoning shows that if w is a member of y and not x then E(x). Either way, , and so by contraposition and generalization (2) follows.

The fact that the essence function is 1-1 shows that it satisfies a criterion for any understanding of a CIC -- no two non-identical beings have the same CIC. But here someone might object on the grounds that a CIC is the wrong type of essence to consider when considering whether some being is identical to its essence. So, for instance, according to Aquinas, when he says that simple substances are identical to their essences, the kind of essence in question is a species, not an individual essence.

The second difference is that the essences of composite things, since they are received   
in designated matter, are multiplied by the division of designated matter, whence in their case it happens that there are numerically distinct things in the same species. However, since the essence of a simple thing is not received in matter, in their case there cannot be this kind of multiplication; therefore, in the case of these substances, there cannot be several individuals in the same species, but there are as many species as there are individuals, as Avicenna expressly claims.

Hence, the objection continues, a mathematical examination of a being that is identical to its CIC is not thereby an investigation into the kind of being that simple substances are, at least not according to Aquinas.

This objection, however, has an answer, one whose basis appears already in the above quotation. Aquinas claims that a simple substance, though a species, necessarily has only one instance. It follows, therefore that simple substances satisfy the 1-1 condition on the essence function: For any two simple substances, x and y, if the essence of x is identical to the essence of y, then x is identical to y. Hence, the essence axiom characterizes Aquinas’s simple substances; and so, a mathematical investigation of essence as understood in this paper is indeed an investigation into the kind of being that according to Aquinas the simple substances are.

Although identity to essence can be given a formal treatment within set-theory, it is not hard to see that the set theory in question must be non-well-founded. If a set is identical to its essence, then it contains all the sets that contain it and so violates the axiom of foundation. In this paper, I won’t take a stand as to which non-well-founded set-theory provides the proper set theoretic framework for a theory of identity to essence, since the axioms I employ are part of the two best known and mathematically serviceable non-well-founded set theories, namely Quine’s NF and Positive Set Theory. In fact, for the purposes of presenting the theory we will not need any comprehension schema. Rather, in addition to the Essence Axiom, we need only the existence of the universal set, or what I call *Being*, the existence of the empty set, what I call *non-Being*, and Extensionality.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In what follows I prove one theorem and discuss the structure entailed by several others that serve to characterize a being that is identical to its essence and go on to comment on the theological significance of the mathematical results. The theorem can be proven from the essence axiom and extensionality alone. The theorem establishes an equivalence between the concept of identity to essence and the concept of a perfect Being. It may strike one as jarring to claim that a mathematical theory can talk about a perfect Being. But, as shall become apparent, the sense of perfection I have in mind can be given a mathematical formulation in terms of the concept of symmetry. The other theorems require in addition the existence of Being and non-Being. They show that the process of counting the members of a set that is identical to its essence is a Sisyphusian process. Once again, the idea that something like Camus’ Myth of Sisyphus could be represented mathematically may seem initially jarring. But, as in the case of perfection, there is a mathematically precise way of characterizing such a process by way of the concept of symmetry. Although my rendering of the concepts of a perfect Being and a Sisyphusian process may not conform to every philosopher’s understanding of those concepts, as far as I know, no philosopher’s understanding of perfection or a Sisyphusian process has ever been given a mathematical articulation.

In section I of this paper, I argue that identity to essence entails perfection. In section II, I argue that counting the members of a being that is identical to its essence is a Sisyphusian process. Each section is divided into two parts, a first that contains mathematical preliminaries and a second that contains a discussion of the philosophical implications of those preliminaries.

Section I – Identity to Essence and Universal Symmetry

Part I – Mathematical Preliminaries

The claim that identity to essence entails perfection depends on the following theorem, which expresses an equivalence between identity to essence and universal symmetry with respect to set-membership relation.

1. (

The set-membership relation is the only non-logical relation within set theory and, because of set theory’s foundationalist credentials, arguably the only non-logical relation needed for all of mathematics and the physical sciences. (3) thus expresses the fact that identity to essence is equivalent to being universally symmetrical with respect to what is arguably the most fundamental non-logical relation, one that is standardly taken to represent the is of predication. Let us suppose that to be a symmetry of being is to be related symmetrically by the set membership relation to every other set. (3) expresses the fact that being identical to one’s essence is equivalent to being a symmetry of being.

It has long been recognized, as the following quotation from Aristotle attests, that symmetry is both a mark of beauty and formal causation in mathematics.

Since the good (ἀγαθόν) and the beautiful (καλόν) are different (since the good always occurs in action and the beautiful occurs also in immobile things), those who say that the mathematical sciences say nothing about the beautiful or the good are wrong. For these speak and offer proofs about these things most of all; for even if they do not name them, they prove things about their results (ἔργά) and their formuals (λόγους). For the greatest forms of beauty are order and symmetry and the determinate, which are the very things the mathematical sciences prove most of all. And since, to be sure, these (I mean, for instance order and the determinate) appear as causes of many things, it is clear that they would speak of this sort of cause as well, and that the beautiful is also a certain sort of cause. (Metaphysics, )

As became clear in the 20th century due to the work of Noether, Einstein and other mathematicians and physicists, symmetry is also a formal cause of the physical laws. For those familiar with 20th century physics, this is a familiar claim. But for those not familiar, it may be worthwhile to quote Richard Feynman whose interest and indeed awe concerning the matter should show just important symmetry is.

“The symmetries of the physical laws are very interesting at this level, but they turn out, in the end, to be even more interesting and exciting when we come to quantum mechanics. For a reason which we cannot make clear at the level for the present discussion – a fact that most physicists still find somewhat staggering, a most profound and beautiful thing, is that in quantum mechanics, *for each of the rules of symmetry there is a corresponding conservation law*; there is a definite connection between the laws of conservation and the symmetries of physical laws.” (Feynman Lectures)

Near the end of his discussion of symmetry, Feynman asks: “So our problem is to explain where symmetry comes from. Why is nature so nearly symmetrical? No one has any idea why.”

Although Feynman understandably does not suggest a metaphysical answer to his question, it is worth considering whether some metaphysical answer could be proposed. Presumably, a metaphysical answer would involve something analogous to the symmetry principles in physics. (3) shows that it is indeed possible to make sense of a symmetry of being and moreover that any such object must be identical to its essence. Thus, symmetry, in addition to being a formal cause in mathematics and physics can also be a formal cause in metaphysics. Although I will not try to argue that a symmetry of being is the correct answer to Feynman’s question, it is certainly noteworthy that were one to appeal to a symmetry of being, because it would be identical to its essence, would halt an explanatory regress.

Now, someone might object at this point that there is a disanalogy between the type of symmetries in other branches of mathematics and physics and the type considered here. Symmetry in mathematics and physics is typically understood in terms of an object’s remaining the same under some operation, whereas the symmetry of being in (3) is a logical notion defined in terms of the material biconditional. In response to this objection, one can point out that the axioms needed in order to prove (3) are so minimal and hence that the proof is of such a fundamental nature that the symmetry in question must be of a logical nature. The standard cases of symmetry in geometry presuppose that the objects in question have a considerable amount of structure that allow for some type of operation to be performed on the elements of the object. At this point in the development of the present theory, however, we have only assumed extensionality and the essence axiom. We thus don’t have any robust structure to work with. To the extent that some notion of symmetry can be employed, it must be the logical notion. In a logical sense, a relation, R, is symmetrical if and only if . An object, G, exhibits such a symmetry if and only if . And because there is only one non-logical predicate in the theory, namely the set-membership relation, the symmetry in question must therefore be: . Moreover, (3), already goes some way to integrating such a logical sense of symmetry into a more familiar geometrical sense in that it shows the equivalence between the logical sense of symmetry and being a fixed point of a function. And not just any function but arguably the most important function in metaphysics, the essence function.

The proof of (3) is straightforward.

First, assume . Suppose . Then, by the symmetry of , . Therefore, by the definition of an essence, . Suppose . Then, by the definition of an essence, . Therefore, by the symmetry of G, . Therefore, for any set, , . Therefore, by extensionality, .

Second, assume that . Suppose that . Then, by the identity of G to its essence, . Therefore, by the definition of an essence, . Suppose that . Then by the definition of an essence, . Therefore, by the identity of and , . Therefore, for any set, , .

Part II – Philosophical Implications

Theologians within the tradition of *Perfect Being Theology* (PBT) claim that God is not just good but perfectly good. Theologians within the same tradition have differed, however, in their understanding of what that means. Although I won’t attempt an exhaustive comparison between the concept of perfection in this paper and the concept as it has appeared in the philosophical tradition, I will situate the account relative to a recent trend within PBT. Recently, philosophers have argued that perfect goodness entails perfect moral agency. (Morris 1989b, p. 26; Wierenga 1989, p. 202) A perfectly good being has morally unsurpassable agency where this is thought to entail constraints on the desires, beliefs, and actions of such a being. Though widely accepted, the plausibility of such a claim rests on the plausibility of the claim that a perfect being is a person. For if the perfect being is not a person, then there is no reason to suppose that it must possess perfect moral agency, which is a defining feature of a person, not a defining condition of a being. And there are historical and contemporary examples of religions and philosophers who have advanced conceptions of an ultimate metaphysical principle that is not a person. Brahman in the Hindu tradition is one obvious example. And Schellenberg has recently argued very persuasively that a general conception of God need not be personal but can nonetheless exhibit what he calls metaphysical and axiological ultimacy. (Schellenberg, 2005, 2007, 2009)

Schellenberg does not say precisely what metaphysical ultimacy is, arguing instead that it can be filled out in various ways. But, he claims, it crucially involves some notion of explanatory fundamentality. Historically, identity to essence was considered one way of expressing such a notion. If something’s features are explained by its essence, then to be identical to one’s essence entails being the explanation of one’s own features. If one of those features is existence, then a being identical to its essence explains its own existence. We can plausibly maintain, therefore, that the concept being analyzed in this paper is one way of filling out the notion of metaphysical ultimacy.

Schellenberg understands axiological ultimacy as follows: “To say that something is axiologically transcendent is to say that its intrinsic value – its splendour, its excellence – exceeds that of anything found in mundane reality alone.” Importantly, he does not think that the value in question must provide the foundations of ethics, which presumably explains his appeal to the concepts of splendour and excellence rather than the concept of unsurpassable moral agency. He says: “Some might be tempted to assume that I have in mind, when speaking of axiological ultimacy, some claim to the effect that the existence of the Ultimate is the foundation for ethics or value theory or some such thing…But no, this is not the case. Of course, there are conceivable elaborations of axiological ultimacy that run in this direction, but nothing of the sort is entailed by it.” If a Being is splendid or excellent in an unsurpassable way, according to Schellenberg, it can be considered axiologically ultimate.

The value that (3) involves is symmetry with respect to the most fundamental non-logical relation. The fact that it is unsurpassably symmetrical follows from the fact that it is universally symmetrical. For, it is not possible to be more symmetrical than universally symmetrical. So, does that make such a being unsurpassably splendid or excellent? Yes. Or so it seems to me at any rate. A thorough discussion of the various ways that symmetry enters moral and aesthetic judgements as well as the way that it is involved in mathematical and physical theories is well beyond the scope of this paper. But it is difficult to think of some other concept that could simultaneously link together the mathematical, the physical, the aesthetic, and the moral domains. To be sure, the concepts of symmetry in these areas differ. And to be sure in each domain one must take account of asymmetries in order to achieve a thorough understanding of the phenomena. Nonetheless, it is difficult to deny that symmetry, though a strict mathematical concept, can plausibly be understood as a feature that confers value, either moral, aesthetic, or explanatory, on an object. Exhibiting symmetry with respect to the *most fundame*ntal non-logical relation thus plausibly increases the value of that value, so to speak, to a level at which no greater possible value of that sort exists. Having that value universally would then quite plausibly make the object in question unsurpassably valuable, or as I have said previously, perfect. The ultimate philosophical implication of (3), therefore, is that it shows the equivalence of axiological and metaphysical ultimacy, at least as those concepts can plausibly be filled out.

Although the perfection involved in unsurpassable symmetry is more general than the concept of perfect moral agency, there is a relation between the two. Suppose we follow Aristotle as he was quoted above and distinguish between the beautiful and the good -- the good, one can contend, is properly speaking a predicate of actions, whereas beauty, which Aristotle correctly notes is linked to symmetry, is a predicate of mathematical objects. So too, one might argue, that the universal symmetry that identity to essence entails is a value that is logically prior to the domain of action and so does not, until further specified, entail perfect moral agency. But, if appropriately specified by reference to the actions that God might take, (assuming that God is the sort of being that can act), the universal symmetry entailed by identity to essence entails perfect moral agency.

One might of course wonder at this point what connection there is between symmetry and perfect moral agency. A very quick answer, one that must be filled out considerably if it is to be adequately defended, can be given that should indicate the direction a more thorough discussion would take. In short, symmetry is partly constitutive of love. When two agents love each other, they become one. Their becoming one is in some sense metaphorical. But it is also literally true insofar as agents who love each other begin to have identical interests. The identity of interests can be understood as entailing a symmetry in their relationship. A husband who loves his wife, for instance, will tend to have desires for their future if and only if the wife has those same desires. Hence, a being that is identical to its essence has a perfected form of a relation that is partly constitutive of love. Hence, one can plausibly claim that universal symmetry is a general and perfect form of a fundamental structure of love. And because God is identical to her essence, one can say that she is perfect love. Because a being that is perfect love would exhibit perfect moral agency, we have a conceptual route from universal symmetry to perfect moral agency. By locating an unsurpassable value that God is independent of his being an agent, one can plausibly provide a non-circular and informative account of why God is a perfect moral agent: God acts in a morally unsurpassable way because she is the form of perfect love

Once again, I reiterate that a philosopher may have a different conception of perfection than universal symmetry. But once again, I reiterate that Perfect Being Theologians have not articulated the conception within a mathematical framework. Indeed, the standard practice within PBT is to take the concept of perfection as undefined. Consider, for instance, what Brian Leftow says about Jeff Speaks’ book, a book that Leftow claims is the most thorough and extended critique of PBT in the history of philosophy. Notice the parenthetical remark.

Perfect being theologies are machines to crank out divine attributes. As Speaks sees it, each has two moving parts. One is a claim that God is the greatest being in some range—actual, possible, or conceivable beings. “Pure” PBT adds a greatness condition. “Impure” adds a bridge principle. Attributes that meet a greatness condition add to a thing’s greatness. *(Speaks does not worry about what greatness is. He in effect spots PBT what it needs to get going, and argues that even so, it doesn’t work.)*

Speaks’ strategy here is not in question. If he can find insuperable problems with PBT independent of any view about perfection, then he has successfully criticized it. But his omission is notable and in line with many perfect being theologians who take the concept of greatness as indefinable and yet still try to determine the characteristics that such a being must have. According to Leftow, for instance, perfect being theology provides what he calls a *recipe* for discovering the perfect being’s characteristic. One need not be overly positivistic to find such an approach to be less than ideal.

It is not my intention, however, to engage with alternative approaches to the concept of greatness in PBT. Rather, I simply note that understanding perfection as universal symmetry yields a remarkable result, namely a proof that perfection is equivalent to identity to essence. The concept used in the proof is of the same general type as a concept that plays an ineliminable role in mathematical theories, in the foundations of physics, and in people’s judgements about beauty and goodness. And as a result of the account, those theologians who think that God is a person and hence has unsurpassable moral agency can now provide a non-circular informative explanation as to why God acts in a morally unsurpassable way. Such an explanation goes well beyond simply insisting that God must act in such a way because she is, well, perfect. A being that is identical to its essence must have in an unsurpassable way a kind of value that is plausibly construed as being partly constitutive of love and hence must lead an agent who has such a value to act, if such an agent can act, in a morally unsurpassable way.

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*Section II – A Sisyphusian Process*

*Part I – Mathematical Preliminaries*

The claim that counting the members of a being that is identical to its essence is a Sisyphusian process depends on the internal structure of such a being. To describe that structure requires two additional axioms, the first of which is ruled out in well-founded theories but is part of both Quine’s NF and Positive Set Theory and the second of which is a standard part of well-founded set theories. In stating the axioms, I have used ‘Being’ instead of ‘the universal set’ and ‘non-Being’ instead of the empty set. Although a mere terminological difference, it is a difference that tracks much more closely historical metaphysical debates than the usual terminology.



With just (1), (4), (5), and extensionality, a structure reminiscent of an Escher drawing, is entailed. I have presented elsewhere proofs of several theorems that serve to characterize the structure (Studtmann 2021). For the purposes of this paper, I omit the proofs and instead present the structure informally.

The first thing to note is that the Essence Axiom and the non-Being Axiom jointly entail an infinite progression of sets. Let ‘E(x)’ denote the essence of x and ‘∅’ denote non-Being. Then, the two axioms entail the existence of non-Being, ∅, the existence of the essence of non-Being, E(∅), the existence of the essence of the essence of non-Being, E(E(∅)), and so on. Likewise, the Essence axiom and the Being axiom entail an infinite progression of sets: Being, E(Being), E(E(Being), and so on. For the ease of expression, I will call any set that is part of the progression of essences stemming from non-Being a ‘non-Being essence’ and any set that is part of the progression of essences stemming from Being a ‘Being essence’. I will also employ the following notation – En(x) – to stand for the essence function applied n times repeatedly beginning with x. So, for instance, E3(∅) = E(E(E(∅))). In the limit when n=0, En(x)=x.

If one includes only those sets that are entailed by (1), (4), (5), and extensionality, then the non-Being essences are all finite sets whose members are Being essences. Each non-Being essence, En(∅) contains all the Being essences Em(Being) such that . So, for instance, E1(∅) contains E0(Being), E2(∅) contains E0(Being) and E1(Being), and so on. The Being essences are all infinite sets. Each Being essence contains every Being essence. In addition, each Being essence Em(Being) contains every non-Being essence En(∅) such that . The following is a visual representation of the first several Being and non-Being essences.

E0(Being) = {E0(Being), E1(Being), E2(Being)… E0(∅), E1(∅), E2(∅), E3(∅)…}

E1(Being) = {E0(Being), E1(Being), E2(Being)… E1(∅), E2(∅), E3(∅)…}

E2(Being) = {E0(Being), E1(Being), E2(Being)… E2(∅), E3(∅)…}

E3(Being) = {E0(Being), E1(Being), E2(Being)… E3(∅)…}

E0(∅) = {}

E1(∅) = {E0(Being)}

E2(∅) = {E0(Being), E1(Being)}

E3(∅) = {E0(Being), E1(Being), E2(Being)}

E4(∅) = {E0(Being), E1(Being), E2(Being), E3(Being)}

In this structure, the Being Essences progressively lose more and more of the non-Being essences. So, for instance, E0(Being) contains everything, both all the Being essences and all the non-Being essences. E1(Being) contains all but one thing: It contains all the Being essences as well as all the non-Being essences except E0(∅). E2(Being) contains everything but two things. And so on. It is as if the progression of Being essences is progressively drained of the non-Being essences. Were one to take such a progression out to infinity, one would reach a set that contains all the Being essences and none of the non-Being essences. In other words, Eω(Being)= {Em(Being) | m is a non-negative integer}.The progression of non-Being essences, on the other hand, does not consist in a successive loss of sets but rather a successive gaining of sets. E0(∅), i.e., non-Being, contains nothing, E1(∅) contains one set, namely E0(Being). E2(∅) contains two sets, namely E0(Being) and E1(Being). And so on. Were one to take such a progression out to infinity, one would again reach the set that contains all of the Being essences: Eω(∅)= {Em(Being) | m is a positive integer}. Hence, Eω(Being) = Eω(∅). What can be called ‘the point at infinity’ for both the Being and non-Being essences is the set that contains all the Being essences.

When one considers the God axiom in addition to the other four axioms, it turns out that God is the point at infinity for the progression of Being and non-Being essences. The following is a visual representation of God and the first four Being essences that she contains.

God = {

E0(Being) = {God, E0(Being), E1(Being), E2(Being)… E0(∅), E1(∅), E2(∅), E3(∅)…}

E1(Being) = {God, E0(Being), E1(Being), E2(Being)… E1(∅), E2(∅), E3(∅)…}

E2(Being) = {God, E0(Being), E1(Being), E2(Being)… E2(∅), E3(∅)…}

E3(Being) = {God, E0(Being), E1(Being), E2(Being)… E3(∅)…}

…}

With this structure in place, it is possible to notice an interesting fact about the Being essences – each one is perfectly symmetrical with respect to the set membership relation with only one exception. In the case of Being, every set, x, but non-Being is such that Being is in x if and only if x is in Being. In the case of the essence of Being every set, x, but the essence of non-Being is such that the essence of Being is in x if and only if x is in the essence of Being. And so on. Suppose, then, that one construes the process of counting the Being essences in terms of the attempt to restore perfect symmetry to each Being essence by removing the one source of asymmetry in it. Such a process is equivalent to repeatedly applying the essence function to the Being essences. So, for instance, begin with Being and remove the one source of asymmetry in it, namely the empty set. The result is the essence of Being, which has a single source of asymmetry, namely the essence of non-Being. Suppose again that one tries to restore perfect symmetry by removing that one source of asymmetry. The result is the essence of the essence of Being, which has its own single source of asymmetry. And so on.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Part II – Philosophical Implications

It is not through lack of love that Don Juan goes from woman to woman. It is ridiculous to represent him as a mystic in quest of total love. But it is indeed because he loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest. (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*)

Let us call a process Sisyphusian if it involves an attempt to accomplish a goal by performing an action only for the result of that action to yield a situation in which the structure that led to the original goal is again present. Famously, Camus considered human existence to be Sisyphusian. Although readers of Camus typically focus on Camus’s discussion of Sisyphus, Camus’s description of Don Juan provides the clearest description of a Sisyphusian process. Don Juan has a fundamental passion that leads him from woman to woman. Each time his passion is sated, it rises again to lead him to the next woman. There is no escape from the process for Don Juan except through death. Exactly in line with Camus’s view of human existence, Sartre views consciousness as Sisyphusian. (*Being and Nothingness*) The fundamental goal of consciousness, a goal that arises because of consciousness’ nature as a lack, is to become God, or what Sartre calls an In-Itself For-Itself. But, because God is an impossible synthesis of those two opposing types of Being, any success that consciousness might have in achieving its goal leads to a desire being sated, not satisfied. Once sated, consciousness seeks out another object to fill itself with. And so on. Consciousness, according to Sartre, is a useless passion.

Because both Camus and Sartre were atheists, it is natural to suppose that the Sisyphusian nature of human existence is tied to God’s non-existence. And theists have generally wanted to claim that the existence of God suffices to endow humans and the universe with a telos. Although they typically don’t use such language, such a telos one might naturally suppose, makes both human existence and the universe non-Sisyphusian. But despite these loose historical and conceptual connections, the analysis in this paper shows that the existence of God, assuming she is identical to her essence, entails the existence of a Sisyphusian process, one that occurs as a result of the members of God. At each step in the process of counting the Being essences the goal is to achieve perfect symmetry, i.e.to become like God. In this way, such a counting process mirrors exactly Sartre’s understanding of consciousness. The means for achieving that goal is by removing the asymmetry that keeps a Being essence from universal symmetry. And the result is a set that has a different source of asymmetry. And so on, *ad infinitum*. Though the goal of the process is to become like God, God is forever out of reach. Far from being opposed to a Sisyphusian universe, God entails the existence of a Sisyphusian process, one that occurs as a result of her inner structure.

Paul Tillich famously, and somewhat obscurely, claimed that God is the ground of Being. (Tillich 1951) To the extent that God’s containing Being makes him the ground of Being, Tillich was correct. But God grounds far more than just Being. She grounds *all* the Being essences. Because the process of counting the Being essences is a Sisyphusian process, and because a process that is Sisyphusian is absurd, we can synthesize Tillich’s view and the French existentialists by saying that God is the ground of the absurd.

In addition to allowing for a rhetorically amusing philosophical thesis, the connection between God and the absurd suggests an intriguing connection between God and consciousness. For it is consciousness, according to Sartre, that is fundamentally Sisyphusian.

The nature of consciousness is of course one of the most hotly debated issues in contemporary philosophy. So, I don’t intend this very brief excursion into it to be anything but a suggestive handwave at an issue that requires a great deal more attention that I can give here. But because the thought that God is conscious is such a long-standing view in the history of theological speculation, these few brief remarks may prove useful.

Some think that human consciousness is what might a called a local phenomenon – it arises from matter when matter has reached a certain level of complexity. In recent years, however, several philosophers, the so-called *pan-psychists*, have argued that consciousness is a fundamental feature of the universe. (Strawson, etc.) Typically, however, pan-psychists, betraying their allegiance to a materialist or naturalist worldview, have argued that consciousness is therefore a fundamental feature of the physical universe. (Bernardo Kastrup, a thorough going idealist, is a notable exception). It may be, however, that consciousness is not just physically fundamental but metaphysically fundamental. How could it be metaphysically fundamental? Well, if consciousness were analyzed in terms of the set-membership relation, then it would be analyzed in terms of the metaphysically fundamental concept of the is of predication.

The suggestion that consciousness could be so analyzed will meet with an immediate objection. It does not seem plausible to think that a set that contains a blue sock is a consciousness of the sock. In response to this objection, one can note that such a set lacks a feature that some, for instance Sartre, argue is essential to consciousness, namely immediate self-awareness or what Sartre calls *non-positional awareness of itself*. (Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego)* A set-theoretic representation of a consciousness of a sock, therefore, would involve a set that contains both the blue sock and itself. The possibility of such a set is ruled out within well-founded set theories. So, to the extent that a metaphysician operates within the well-founded paradigm, she will reject the coherence of such a set and hence the possibility of understanding consciousness in terms of set-membership. It should be clear by now, however, that a metaphysician operating within the non-well-founded paradigm would not be moved by such considerations.

With the thought that a set with the appropriate non-well-founded structure could be a consciousness, we can consider the sets in God as well as God herself. All the Being essences are members of themselves. Hence, they satisfy the criterion of immediate self-awareness. In addition, the Being essences contain sets that contain them. In this way, they have what can be considered reflective self-awareness that comes from their relation to others – they are aware of themselves through the awareness of another. Finally, all the being essences contain and hence according to the analysis are aware of an infinite number of other sets. Turning to God, then, we can see that she lacks the immediate self-awareness of the Being essences but nonetheless has a perfect form of other-related reflective self-awareness. Such awareness is appropriate for something that is perfect love – perfect love exhausts itself in awareness of itself through an awareness of the beloved who is aware of the lover and herself as contained in that lover. Were one to understand consciousness in terms of the set-membership of the appropriately structured non-well-founded sets, God is a metaphysical bundle of infinite consciousness. Indeed, just as it is possible to consider God to be the form of perfect love, it is possible to consider God to be the form of perfect consciousness.

Human consciousness is an imperfect form of God’s consciousness, one that is embodied in spatiotemporal beings. Because the process of counting God’s members is Sisyphusian, one would expect to find the temporal nature of human consciousness to inherit the Sisyphusian character of God’s consciousness. According to such an analysis, human consciousness is a useless passion not because consciousness inherits the absurdity that results from God’s non-existence but rather because consciousness inherits a structure that, as Sartre might have said, lies coiled within the heart of God, like a worm.

1. As stated, the Essence Axiom is restricted to sets. One might object that this deviates from Leibniz’s understanding of a CIC, since he clearly intended the notion to apply to individuals. Such an objection, however, presupposes individuals are not sets but should be treated as ur-elements within set theory. Although I won’t pursue the matter here, it is possible to develop a theory of individuals without ur-elements by treating individuals as Quine atoms. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Because the theory requires a universal set, it is not consistent with anti-foundational set theory of the sort found in Aczel (1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a separate paper, I have shown how to augment the axioms so far presented so that they interpret Peano Arithmetic. With additional axioms, each Being essence becomes infinitely complex as a result of containing all the information about its predecessor in the chain of Being essences. Within such a theory, the Being essences no longer exhibit this kind of near perfect symmetry. One can, however, maintain the claim being made in this paper by restricting attention to the Being and non-Being essences that each Being essence contains. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)