

What Makes Us Essentially Different?

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I. Introduction

A rock is different from me, from my self. The aim of my paper is not to defend this claim, but to understand it. What is it for a self to be different from a rock? What is it for anything to be different from something else?

Difference and *sameness* -- or *identity* -- are correlated concepts: to understand one is to understand the other. I will distinguish two accounts of sameness and difference: first, an *essentialist* account of sameness against which an understanding of difference is presented as derivative; secondly, a *contextualist* account which relates both sameness and difference to a more fundamental *horizon* or *context*. I will contrast two kinds of horizons, *synchronic* and *diachronic*, and within diachronic contexts I will discuss the *biological* horizon and the *cultural* or *moral* horizon.

I hope at the end of these distinctions to understand the difference between myself and the rock.

II. Two theories of difference: Essentialism and Contextualism

"Same" and "different" are terms used to compare two or more entities. (Aristotle refers to same and other as "opposites" (*Metaphysics* 1054b23)) Neither can be applied to an entity in isolation: it makes no sense to say of a single object that it is different. Nor can we say of a single object that it is the same. Sameness and difference always refer to some abstracted aspect of the entities involved, for any two entities are the same in some respect -- if only in that they are both entities -- and if they were not different in some respect they would not be two (*ibid.*).

Although sameness and difference are correlated concepts, the position I will call *essentialism* gives a priority to sameness or identity and explains difference in terms of it. Aristotle, the quintessential essentialist, held that each object has an indwelling essence which makes it what it is: a rock, a table, a person. A bronze sphere has in itself, intrinsically, that which it needs to be a bronze sphere, and so it would continue to be a bronze sphere even if everything else in the universe changed or disappeared.¹

¹ "... the essence of each of them is by its very nature a kind of unity as it is a kind of being – and so none of these has any reason outside itself for being one, nor for being a kind of being; for each is by its nature a kind of being and a kind of unity ..." (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1045b5.) While Aristotle, at this point, is discussing "things which have no matter," this understanding of essence applies to all entities.

Two objects are "different" when their essences do not match. Difference is, as it were, a side effect of identity. So for essentialism, sameness and difference are to be understood on the basis of what is intrinsic to each entity itself.

The essentialist account of difference has been challenged during the 20th century on a number of fronts. In linguistics, de Saussure insisted that we should not think of individual words as having their own essence derived from their etymological history but think of each language as a structural whole composed of a series of differences which carry significance for the speakers. In analytic philosophy, Wittgenstein proposed that objects take their identity from the role they play within a language game: a pawn does not differ from a rook because of its wood or any other property internal to it – contemporary pawns are often digital – but because they instantiate different features of the rules of chess.

But one of the most fundamental challenges to essentialism comes from Husserl. He holds that an entity's identity depends on its "horizon" – which he sometimes calls "field" or simply "world" -- the background against which that object, as a meaningful entity in our experience, is given to us. The most obvious is the *perceptual* horizon: visible things are given to us as figures against the unfocused spatial background of the surrounding world. There are other kinds of horizons. A chair can be perceived as a chair only against the *pragmatic* horizon of tables, articulating legs, bums, social conventions of sitting, etc. We can experience the number 7 only against an *arithmetical* horizon of numbers: someone who has no background understanding of 5, 6, 8, 9, 14, or 49 cannot be said to understand seven.² The number 7 does not have an intrinsic essence that would define it in isolation from the wider horizon of arithmetic. Without the horizon it could neither exist nor be known; it would be meaningless.

Essentialism explains difference by reference to intrinsic identity. The contextualist position I am adopting here does *not* claim that we should reverse this by making difference primary and defining sameness in terms of it. This point is important since there is a popular misconception of Derrida which reads him as tracing the origin of sameness in difference. But this is not what he means. Derrida says, "In a conceptuality adhering to classical strictures, 'différance' would be said to designate a constitutive, productive, and originary causality, the process of scission and division which would produce or constitute different things or differences." (Derrida, *Margins*, 8-9) *Différance* is not

² "I busy myself, let us say, with pure numbers and their laws: ... The world of numbers is likewise there for me precisely as the Object-field of arithmetical busiedness; during such busiedness single numbers of numerical formations will be at the focus of my regard, surrounded by a partly determinate, partly indeterminate arithmetical horizon;" (Husserl, *Ideas I*, 54)

difference; it is that which accounts for difference. *Différance* therefore seems to me to be very close to what Husserl calls horizon – Derrida's first two books, remember, were commentaries on Husserlian texts – which would make Derrida a contextualist in my sense. Of course saying as I do that horizons constitute differences would be to phrase the point in a relatively clear way which – God forbid – “adheres to classic strictures.” It would take more courage than I have to interpret for you what Derrida means when he moves to his own style and leaves such strictures behind.

Contextualism, then, is the anti-essentialist position that both sameness and difference make sense only within more fundamental structures – horizons –which bring *both* of them into being. Both are to be understood as roles within larger systems.

III. Contextualism: Synchronous

The notion of context or horizon might, at first, be understood as referring to a static, synchronous structure, that is, a structure all of whose parts exist at the same time. Let me offer two examples, one simple, the other more complex, of such synchronous horizons and show how they constitute entities as the same and different.

Synchronous example #1: Money

Consider the identity of a loonie. As a coin, it is not simply a lump of metal defined by its intrinsic properties; it is a piece of money worth a hundred cents. *What it is* is defined by its relationship to other Canadian coins – and paper money, electronic money, etc. -- but, above all, it is defined by its functional role within our system of exchange. Outside of that system it is just a lump of metal, not a piece of money with monetary value. Indeed we can say that as a loonie it is defined primarily by its monetary value. Its identity is derived from its context, not from some intrinsic principle within the coin itself. If we insisted on a rigorous fact-value distinction and held that what objects essentially are is a factual matter, then we could never define the being of a loonie. What makes a loonie different from a quarter, or from a rock for that matter, is above all its value – in this case a monetary value. The contextual account of the difference is blind to the fact-value dichotomy and, since it differentiates the entity by appeal to its role in the system, it establishes a norm. If someone uses a quarter as if it were a loonie they have done something (monetarily) wrong. The exchange system determines the role that the loonie *should* play in exchange. An essentialist account, because it attempts to define entities in isolation from their contexts, would inevitably have problems accounting for value.

Similarly, the Prime Minister is not the Prime Minister because of something internal to him but because of his relationships to the monarch, to parliament, to voters, and so on. The difference between the Queen and the Governor General does not derive from any of their intrinsic properties; it reflects the various roles they have within our political system. It is that system which establishes the norms of behaviour for these functionaries: the Governor General is supposed to sign Acts of Parliament into laws. If she does not do so, this is not simply a factual matter; she has violated the norm and *failed* as a governor general.

Synchronous example #2: Qualia

A more complex example of the fertility of the contextualist understanding of difference can be found by looking at Dennett's discussion of *qualia*. Sensationalism, inspired by empiricists such as Locke and Hume, holds that the mind initially experiences isolated sense-data, *qualia*, such as the experience of a datum of redness. What makes the experience of red "red" is something essential and intrinsic to the content of the experience itself. An empiricist thinks she can imagine a mind which would be conscious of the sense-datum red even if it never had any other experience. The difference then between experiencing red and green is derivative from the intrinsic identity, the essential quality each datum has in itself. It is therefore possible (though only to philosophers) that the *qualia* you and I have could be inverted, that I could experience green where you experience red, even though we might both *call* the experience red.

An experiment in the 1970s cast doubts on this way of thinking. When a scene with various coloured objects is lit only with two frequencies of yellow light, a person who looks at it may initially experience only a washed-out yellow scene, but once they adjust to the new situation objects come to be seen again as red and green. This suggests that what makes an object appear red is not the absolute frequency of light which it reflects but rather the contrast, the difference between objects which reflect higher or lower frequencies. Red, thus, is not an intrinsic property of the datum, but a relational property which is defined only by its opposition to green (and to other colours).

A much more radical criticism of the essentialist approach to *qualia* can be found in one of Dennett's most brilliant arguments. (*Consciousness Explained* 389-398) In his thought-experiment, Dennett imagines that an evil neurosurgeon has inverted my red and green *qualia* without me noticing. For such *qualia* inversion to be possible without me being aware of it, *two* changes are required: the input from the retina to consciousness must be inverted, but all my dispositions to react must also be

inverted. I must now stop my car when I see green; I must say "red" when I see green; I must become more alert when I see green and relax when I see red; indeed I must even judge and think that I see red when green is present to me. But once we grant this, says Dennett, it no longer makes sense to say that I "experience" green, since I judge that I am experiencing red. It simply "seems to me" that the red stoplight is red and hence there is no evidence for the existence of a green *quale*. In fact there *could* be no evidence, since the green *quale* is hypothesized to be a purely subjective state, yet to the subject – myself – the content of the experience *seems* to be red, for that is how I've judged it to be. So the experience is of something subjectively red, not green. Dennett's conclusion is that the empiricist hypothesis of intrinsically defined *qualia* must be rejected. Instead red and green must be seen as distinctions that appear only within a network of other perceptions, of actions and of dispositions. In other words, he offers a contextualist analysis of the difference of colours in place of the essentialist, intrinsic account offered by the empiricists.

IV. Diachronic horizons

So far, I have looked at two examples that show how synchronous contexts define difference and identity. But there is a second kind of context: the temporal horizon. Husserl claims that there are many different kinds of horizons, spatial, perceptual, pragmatic, mathematical, and so on, which all have the analogous role of constituting the meanings of the entities that are constituted within them. The temporal horizon is but one of these horizons and has a similar function (although, since for Husserl all consciousness is essentially temporal, the temporal horizon is in some way the most fundamental of all. (Husserl, *Ideas I*, 195-196)) In Husserl's discussion of music, for example, every note in a melody takes its meaning, its musical significance, from its relationship to previous notes and its anticipation of future notes for which it sets the stage. (Husserl, *Internal Time Consciousness*, 43)

Let me again offer two examples to illustrate how temporal contexts can constitute entities: one from biology, the other from culture.

Diachronic example #1: Biological telei

Not all relationships of an entity to its past qualify as contextual or constitutive relationships. Some are simply causal. For example, we can offer a causal explanation for the existence of the moon: billions of years ago a meteorite hit the earth and broke off a large glob which congealed into the moon. While some causal account is necessary to explain why the moon is where it is, such reference to past events does not define the essence of what it is to be a moon.

The situation is quite different when we define entities by reference to biological evolution by natural selection (this is the only way I will use the terms "evolution" or "selection" in this paper.) Unlike purely causal accounts, an evolutionary account explains the essence of a biologic entity by attributing to it a *telos* – a purpose, goal or function -- generated by its history of selection. The story of such an entity's genesis is the story of how it came to have a goal, a function that defines what it is and differentiates it from other biological entities. Let me work from an example.

Biologists have discovered that Northern Codfish can survive freezing ocean temperatures only because they produce a particular glycoprotein in their bloodstreams that functions as an antifreeze. The presence of the glycoprotein has been explained by tracking down the gene in the DNA that codes for this protein. Some 2.5 million years ago, about 500,000 codfish generations, some great ancestral-grandmother cod suffered a mutation, perhaps from cosmic rays, which created the gene for the glycoprotein. While such mutations may have occurred many times before, the Ice Age conditions at that particular time led to her and her offspring surviving freezing conditions while codfish without this mutation tended to die off. In the previous generations the accidental appearance of glycoprotein from time to time had no biological *telos*; the mutation was just there by "biological chance," as it were. But among the descendants of the crucial grandmother cod, over many generations the glycoprotein took on the *function* of being an antifreeze. In evolutionary terms, the glycoprotein is part of the normal equipment of cod today only because, without it, the ancestors of today's fish would not have survived. Its presence in the current generation, then, is no longer biological chance; it has a biological reason, a *telos*. At this stage we can say of a cod born without this glycoprotein that it is biologically defective. That is, there is now a norm: codfish are *supposed to be* equipped with antifreeze. Unlike the purely causal account of the moon's existence, we have here an evolutionary account of the genesis of an entity, an antifreeze, which is defined essentially by its *telos*, its function. A similar account based on selection could be given of any "organ": the heart, teeth, liver, lungs, eyes and so on are defined by their function only because of their relationship to past events which conferred their *teloi* onto them. It is their *teloi* which define their identity and difference.

It is crucial to see that this is not a purely causal explanation, like that given for the moon. Aristotle says that an eclipse of the moon does not have a final cause (*Metaphysics* 1044 b 12). He claims, on the other hand, that biological entities cannot be understood by efficient causality alone. "Nature belongs to the class of causes which act for the sake of something." (Aristotle, *Physics*, 198b10) Teeth, for instance, do not come into being by chance: nature produces them for the sake of chewing. Without them the organism would not survive. However, Aristotle takes these purposes as simply

given. He doesn't explain how "nature" produces them. What he fails to see, being pre-Darwinian, is that without teeth *the ancestors of the organism* would not have survived and as a result there would be no present organism and no teeth. To attribute to front teeth the current *function* of tearing is to say, in truncated form, that the ancestors survived because they had teeth that did *in fact* tear.

Consider one specific codfish, Charly. We can say that Charly survived last winter because there was glycoprotein in her blood. This is a purely causal account of the event. This story does not account, does not even attempt to account, for the glycoprotein in Charly's blood having the *function* of being an antifreeze. There is no mention of *telos* in the causal chain story. The *telos* is not the effect of a cause as the simple factual presence of the glycoprotein is. To account for the *telos* of the glycoprotein we must appeal to a much wider context of temporal factors within which the causal chain occurs. We will need to mention ice ages 2.5 million years ago, the absence of glycoprotein in the ancestral grandmother's siblings and their offspring, the consequent differential reproduction rates of these two clades of codfish, and many similar evolutionary adaptive factors. This is a contextualist account that bestows functionality on the basis of a context that goes beyond the direct causal chain that explains the current presence of the glycoprotein.

Some things, the moon for instance, are not defined by their *teloi*. To say of a dog's heart, on the other hand, that it is teleologically defined, is not simply to say that it does *as a matter of fact* pump blood; it is to say that it *should* pump blood, that it is supposed to pump blood, that pumping blood is its normal activity so that in heart failure, when the heart does not adequately pump blood, it is *defective*, operating abnormally. Again, Aristotle got it right: "Hence clearly mistakes are possible in the operations of nature also. If then in art there are cases in which what is rightly produced serves a purpose, and if where mistakes occur there was a purpose in what was attempted, only it was not attained, so must it be also in natural products, and monstrosities will be failures in the purposive effort." (*Physics* 198b35) A *telos* is normative; it is value-laden. In the case of an entity whose essence derives from its *telos*, Hume's fact-value distinction cannot be made: the entity is value-laden simply by being what it is.

There are three crucial, and interconnected notions here: the process of selection, the unity of an organic entity, and *telos*. The heart is one unified entity, differentiated from teeth, because it has a *telos* needed to maintain the life of the organism; it is a necessary part of the organization of the unity. Various organs have varying *teloi*: this is why they are *different*. But the organism as a whole is the way it is because it is a member of a species, a species that has been moulded by the constraints of

natural selection to be fit to survive. By contrast, the moon has no *telos* because it is not needed for the survival of the solar system. The solar system is not an organic unity and, although it has a history, that history is purely causal and is not governed by the process of selection. Without the heart pumping blood in each of its phenotypes, the species as a whole would not have survived. It is this fact, an effect of selection, that makes the heart necessary for the organism. This is not of course a logical or physical necessity; it is a biological necessity, for this particular species is characterized by the kind of organic unity it has developed. Biological necessity has two components: the heart pumping blood is necessary for the life of the individual organism; but this is a secondary necessity which derives from the more fundamental necessity that the species needed to evolve the heart in order to survive over time in the face of selection pressures. The essence of the heart, that is, its *telos*, the fact that it pumps blood *for the sake of* the individual organism, is the expression in the present of the evolutionary selection the species has undergone in the past. That is what I mean by saying that a biological *telos* is a crystallized history: it is differentiated by a specific kind of temporal horizon.

Diachronic example #2: The Self as a Cultural Differentiation

Humans are biological organisms and we too have teeth and hearts – though we have to rely on imbibed alcohol for antifreeze. However with the arrival of language and culture we are able to build on and extrapolate from biological *teloi*. I have already given the example of the loonie, a construct that comes into being against the cultural horizon of exchange. It is not simply that cultures construct new entities; cultures create new contexts, new horizons within which individual constructs can be differentiated. For instance, the game of chess is a new context created by culture within which the difference between pawns and rooks is constituted. While selection may still play some part in the construction of entities on the cultural level, it no longer has the exclusive role that it does on the biological level. The construction of mathematical entities that Husserl studies in the *Origin of Geometry*, for instance, has little or no role for selective competition.

One of the most important cultural constructions is the constitution of the moral horizon within which the entities we call selves can be differentiated.

An essentialist, such as Descartes, thinks of the self as an independent entity defined by its intrinsic property, thought. Descartes' method of doubt suspends all contexts, whether they be physical, cultural, linguistic or historical, and he claims that the experience of the *cogito* guarantees its existence even if none of these contexts exists. For a contextualist, the self cannot be understood in this essentialist manner. The self takes its identity and its being from its context: only within the cultural

and historical horizon of agency, responsibility and commitment are selves differentiated from each other and from non-selves. Before the arrival of these social institutions, no selves were possible.

There are actually two horizons involved here, for an individual self, if understood as a narrative, functions as the temporal horizon for the actions the person performs, and for the states in which they find themselves. The state in which I find myself today -- being committed to writing this paper -- is a state of commitment only because of a promise I made in the past, and the relationship between these two events only makes sense within the overarching unity of my life narrative.³ Both horizons are temporal and normative.

The cultural context of responsibility means that selves are more than biological entities; they cannot be accounted for simply as biological *teloi*. Nevertheless selves are analogous to biological organs in that both are differentiated by an horizon that is ineluctably temporal. Only against the moral horizon of responsibility am I the selfsame agent who is today bound by the commitments made yesterday. Just as the heart, defined by its *telos*, is a crystallization of evolutionary history, so who I am today is a crystallization of the personal history of actions for which I am responsible. The defining feature of the biological horizon is selection; the defining feature of the moral horizon is responsibility. A self is a contextually differentiated entity and the context which defines it is a diachronic one.

Aside on intelligent design

Let me add an aside about a misinterpretation of teleology. Among the new factors that appear with culture are conscious purposes on the part of individual human beings. Loonies were created deliberately. A carpenter building a house sets out with an explicit design in mind. Since such processes are foremost in our experience as human selves, it is natural for philosophers to adopt them as the model for thinking about teleology in general. According to Aristotle:

In artistic production, the form is found in the soul of the artisan, for “the art of building is the form of the house” (1034a24) and “the form is in the soul” (1032b23) of the artisan. For example, the builder has in mind the plan or design for a house and he knows how to build; he then “enmatters” that plan or design by putting it into the materials out of which he builds the house. In natural production, the form is found in the parent, where “the begetter is the same in kind as the begotten, not one in number but one in form — for man begets man” (1033b30-2). But in either case, the form pre-exists and is not produced (1033b18). (“Aristotle’s Metaphysics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.)

³ These ideas derive from the works of Taylor, Ricoeur, McIntyre and others, and were explained in more detail in one of my earlier papers, “Selfhood and Responsibility.”

Now Aristotle himself is clear that biological production, unlike artisanal production, does not require an advance plan in someone's mind. He assumes, rather, that forms are eternal and unchanging, even if they do not transcend the world of individuals, so he never has to account for them coming into being. Some who do accept that biological forms change, however, remain stuck with the model of deliberate, responsible production. But this is a mistake; we might call it the "prejudice of the human," to modifying Merleau-Ponty's phrase: "prejudice of the world." The error is reinforced by the fact that Descartes' mechanistic understanding of nature, that is, the notion that physical objects are purely causal and hence value-free, places all value, including teleological norms, in the mind. For these reasons, some, perceiving the obvious biological purpose of the heart, apply the artisanal paradigm of teleology, and so assume there must be a heart maker with a preplanned, intelligent design like that of the carpenter. Since it is clear that no human mind is responsible for the heart's *telos*, they have no conceptual option but to appeal to a Divine Mind.

What Darwin has done is to use the analogy between selection by human animal-breeders and natural selection to offer us an alternative account of the genesis of biological *teloi*, one which does not rely upon minds, human or divine. Natural selection offers us an account of teleological, biological organs whose essence is defined by their relationship to their historical genesis. Taken in isolation, a heart does *in fact* pump blood; it has the *telos* of pumping blood, however, only when understood within its temporal, historical context, that is by reference to its evolutionary selection. To attribute this *telos* to a mind is to anthropomorphize and read the cultural end of evolution back into its biological beginnings. It is not that intelligent design explains evolution; natural selection explains the evolution of beings capable of designing intelligently.

V. Conclusion

Essentialism holds that objects such as rocks, trees, hearts, glycoprotein anti-freeze, teeth, loonies or selves have intrinsic principles internal to the individual entities which constitute their identities and therefore, secondarily, their differences from other objects. I am claiming that this position is wrong. The sameness and difference of entities both depend on a context or horizon and this horizon may be either synchronous or diachronic. Biological organs, since they are defined by their *teloi*, are examples of entities whose identities are constituted within a temporal horizon by the processes of evolutionary selection. Selves are also entities which are constituted only within a temporal horizon, this time cultural, and are in that way analogous to biological organs. The analogy is limited however, since the

fundamental structures of the moral horizon are based on responsibility rather than natural selection. The crucial point is that selves do not differ from rocks because of some isolated, intrinsic principle, but because of their external temporal relationships.

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