

3

MODERN

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The early modern period in the history of philosophy—roughly, from the middle of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century—was a time of dramatic shifts in philosophical positions and traditions. At the beginning of this period, the Aristotelian paradigm that shaped most medieval philosophy was still dominant. But early modern thinkers increasingly subjected it to scrutiny, criticism, and creative reinterpretation. Naturally, discussions of essence by central figures in the period exemplify this dynamic. My aim here is to survey some of the most important developments, highlighting the ways in which early modern thinkers gradually leave the medieval Aristotelian tradition behind. A central theme is how differing conceptions of the scope of essence lead to differing conceptions of its theoretical roles.

3.1 The Traditional Notion of Essence

According to the Aristotelian tradition that serves as a foil to much early modern philosophy, the nature or essence of x is what it is to be x . To use a standard example, what it is to be a ~~given~~ human being, such as Hypatia, is to be a rational animal: *being rational* and *being an animal* are essential properties of Hypatia. Of course, Hypatia possesses other properties, such as having hair or being curious. These are not essential properties of Hypatia, but instead are “accidents,” for they are not part of what it is to be her.¹

Philosophers working in this tradition generally agreed that essentiality bears an asymmetrical relation to necessity. To use a common example among Aristotelians, although it may be necessary that a human being is risible (capable of laughter), this property is not part of what it is to be a human being. So necessity does not entail essentiality. But essentiality does entail necessity: an entity cannot exist, or be the entity it is, without its essential properties.² Consequently, such properties were taken to play several important theoretical roles, such as helping to explain persistence and unity. Returning to our example, that Hypatia is essentially a rational animal helps to explain why she is the same entity over time (she maintains those properties despite changing in various other respects) and a single individual (rather than a mere aggregate).³

Proponents of this traditional Aristotelian approach to essence held that essential properties play further theoretical roles. For instance, that Hypatia is a rational animal helps

to explain why she is risible. By contrast, her risibility does not explain her status as a rational animal. Here we find an essential property explaining a non-essential property, but not vice versa.⁴ Proponents of the traditional approach similarly viewed essential properties as grounding kind membership. As I will sometimes say, essence was treated as “kind-determining”, in the sense that an individual belongs to a general (i.e., not *sui generis*) kind or species—a group whose members are similar in theoretically important respects—in virtue of the complete set of its essential properties.⁵ For example, that an individual’s essence fully consists in the properties *being rational* and *being an animal* determines that the individual belongs to the kind human being (rather than, say, the kinds angel or bear). That the individual is risible is not essential to her, and so plays no such kind-determining role. Much of my discussion in what follows will focus on the traditional idea that essence is kind-determining.

It should be clear from the above that the traditional view regards essence as selective, in the sense that only some of an entity’s properties are essential to it. The selectivity of essence is a precondition for the two theoretical roles described in the previous paragraph. An entity’s essential properties can explain its non-essential ones only if the former include some but not all of the entity’s properties. That essence is selective also enables it to be kind-determining, by making it possible for two distinct entities to share their essential properties, and so belong to the same kind, while still differing in their other properties.

Having identified some of the core commitments of the traditional notion of essence, I can now state my main thesis: while some elements of the traditional notion remain a fixture of early modern thought, the view of essences as selective undergoes a significant change as the period unfolds. Whereas at the beginning of the period, the idea that essence is selective is very much still alive, various developments eventually call into doubt the utility of a notion of essence that includes this feature.

3.2 Early Modern Traditionalists: Descartes, Hobbes, Cavendish, and Conway

René Descartes (1596–1650) was long considered “the father of modern philosophy” for supposedly almost single-handedly ushering in this philosophical era. This appellation is now largely—and rightly, I think—viewed as obsolete. Nevertheless, Descartes’ thought was highly influential in the early modern period, serving as both a point of departure and foil for many contemporaneous debates. Accordingly, his notion of essence is a good place for us to start.

Many aspects of the traditional notion are on display in *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), where Descartes systematically presents the central tenets of his metaphysical system. He writes:

[E]ach substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred. Thus extension in length, breadth and depth constitutes the nature of corporeal substance; and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. Everything else which can be attributed to body presupposes extension, and is merely a mode of an extended thing; and similarly, whatever we find in the mind is simply one of the various modes of thinking. (CSM 1.210)

This passage tells us that essential properties determine the kind to which a substance belongs—body or mind, respectively.⁶ And moreover, they help to explain a substance’s non-essential properties (i.e., they are that “to which all its other properties are referred”). The passage also expresses the selectivity of essence: while each substance has many properties, it has one essential property, extension or thought. Descartes goes on to write:

[S]hape is unintelligible except in an extended thing; and motion is unintelligible except as motion in an extended space; while imagination, sensation and will are intelligible only in a thinking thing. (*ibid*)

Shape, motion, imagination, sensation, and will are accidental properties, which Descartes calls “modes”. This passage asserts that none of them is intelligible (i.e., liable to explanation) without reference to certain other properties, extension and thought, which are essential. Here, again, we see the selectivity of essence at work.

Selectivity and its accompanying theoretical roles can also be discerned in Descartes’ best-known work, the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). In the Second Meditation, after realizing that “this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind,” the meditator admits that he does “not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this ‘I’ is”. Subsequent reflection enables his mind to “perceive its own nature as distinctly as possible”:

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions. (CSM 2.19)

Turning from mind to body later in the Second Meditation, the meditator summarizes the results of his effort to identify the nature of a piece of wax as follows:

[T]he wax was not after all the sweetness of the honey, or the fragrance of the flowers, or the whiteness, or the shape, or the sound, but was rather a body which presented itself to me in these various forms a little while ago, but which now exhibits different ones. But what exactly is it that I am now imagining? Let us concentrate, take away everything which does not belong to the wax, and see what is left: merely something extended, flexible and changeable. (CSM 2.20)

Here the nature of the wax—what it is to be that body—is presented as selective. Properties such as taste, fragrance, and color are non-essential. That the wax is essentially extended partly explains these non-essential properties—the “various forms” in which the body presents itself to the senses—and determines the kind to which the wax belongs (*viz.*, body).

Commitment to the traditional view of essence is also evident in Descartes’ contemporaries, such as the materialist Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Although he rejects Descartes’ dualism about mind and body, his understanding of what a body is—its essence—is remarkably similar to Descartes’:

[A] body is that, which having no dependence upon our thought, is coincident or coextended with some part of space.⁷ (*De Corpore*, 8.2)

Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673) advances a version of materialism whose view of body highlights not space but “Place”:

MATTER is that we name Body; which Matter cannot be less, or more, than Body ... Also, Matter cannot be figureless, neither can Matter be without Parts. Likewise, there cannot be Matter without Place, nor Place without Matter; so that Matter, Figure, or

Place, is but one thing: for, it is as impossible for One Body to have Two Places, as for One Place to have Two Bodies; neither can there be Place, without Body. (1668, I.1)

Neither Hobbes nor Cavendish is keen on using the terms “nature” and “essence”, often speaking instead of the meaning of the word “body”.⁸ Nevertheless, insofar as both intend to usurp Cartesian dualism, the above passages seem very much designed to replace Descartes’ view that there are two distinct kinds of substance (mind and body), determined by two distinct essences (thought and extension), with a monistic view that recognizes just one kind (body), determined by just one essence (coextension with space, or Place). Moreover, the selective notion of essence undergirding their materialism is in my view the very same one that Descartes employs when articulating his dualism.

It is also the one that Anne Conway (1631–79) relies on when developing her “vitalist,” three-species alternative to both dualism and materialism. She writes:

[W]e must now determine how many species of things there are which are distinguished from each other in terms of their substance or essence. If we look closely into this, we will discover there are only three, which, as was said above, are God, Christ, and creatures ... Since all phenomena in the entire universe can be reduced to these three aforementioned species as if into their original and peculiar causes, nothing compels us to recognize a further species. (1996, 30)

The essential properties of God, Christ, and creatures, which determine the species to which they belong, are immutability, partial mutability, and complete and utter mutability, respectively:

[B]ecause the three aforementioned species exhaust all the specific differences in substances which can possibly be conceived by our minds, then that vast infinity of possible things is fulfilled in these three species Certainly insofar as something can be called an entity, it is either altogether immutable like God, the supreme being, or altogether mutable, that is for good or bad, like a creature, which is the lowest order of being, or partly mutable in respect to good, like Christ, the son of God, the mediator between God and creatures. (*ibid*)

Conway also suggests that essential properties explain non-essential properties, the latter being among the “phenomena” of which the former are the “original and peculiar causes”.⁹

To be clear, my claim is not that when it comes to the character of essence, Descartes, Hobbes, Cavendish, and Conway agree on every point. They do not.¹⁰ Nor is it that they concur with the traditional notion in every single respect.¹¹ Rather, they converge on the view of essence, current in the Aristotelian tradition, as selective, kind-determining, and (according to Conway) explanatory.

3.3 First Countermovement: Spinoza and Leibniz

As we move forward in the seventeenth century, an alternative to the traditional notion of essence begins to emerge. Most evident in the works of Benedict de Spinoza (1632–77) and G.W. Leibniz (1646–1716), this alternative assigns a great many essential properties to any particular entity. Whereas Descartes and other proponents of the traditional view deem a small number of an entity’s properties as essential, Spinoza and Leibniz opt for a highly

inclusive approach that in its extreme form maintains that *all* of an entity's properties are essential to it. As we will see, this "superessentialist" view makes it difficult for essence to play the two theoretical roles highlighted above.

Although superessentialism is often associated with Leibniz, it is his predecessor and arguably major influence, Spinoza, who laid its foundations, although he does not go as far as Leibniz in embracing it.¹² Indeed, as I will now explain, the inclusivity of essence is a natural consequence of the conceptual dependence relations that power Spinoza's metaphysical system.

In his magnum opus, the *Ethics* (1677), Spinoza often claims that one thing can be correctly conceived only through another thing. For example, early in the *Ethics*, he maintains that an effect can only be cognized, or conceived, through its cause:

The cognition of an effect depends on, and involves, cognition of its cause.¹³ (E1a4)

This thesis is often called the "causal axiom". Later in the *Ethics*, Spinoza provides the following definition of essence:

I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing. (E2def2)

Combining what follows "or" in this definition of essence with the causal axiom, some scholars have interpreted Spinoza as holding that all of an entity's causal properties (i.e., those properties that identify its cause) are essential to it.¹⁴ Further evidence for this interpretation is gleaned from Letter 60, where Spinoza claims that "the idea or definition of a thing should express its efficient cause," and from E5a2, where he claims that "[t]he power of an effect is defined by the power of a cause, insofar as its essence is explained or defined by the essence of its cause".¹⁵

Spinoza often equates an entity's essence with its *conatus*, power, or its striving to remain in existence:

The striving [*conatus*] by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing. (E3p7)

[T]he power of each thing, or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything that is (by p6), the power, or striving, by which it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing itself. (E3p7d)

According to Spinoza, the power of an entity to remain in existence, and other powers as well by which it "does anything", are explained by its essence. As this indicates, Spinoza's commitment to a fairly inclusive view of essence is compatible with the idea that essential properties explain non-essential properties.¹⁶

At the same time, such a view implies rejection of the traditional idea that essence is kind-determining. Spinoza's determinism entails that each thing has a unique causal history. Given this, if an entity's essence includes its cause, then any two entities with distinct causal histories—say, Hypatia and Socrates—do not share an essence. But if they do not share an

essence, then they do not share an essence that determines their membership in the same kind. Socrates' essential properties do not place him in the same group as Hypatia, but render him *sui generis*. Likewise for Hypatia: since her essence is unique, it is too particular to determine membership in a general kind.¹⁷

To summarize, Spinoza adopts an inclusive view of essence that diverges from the traditional view with which the early modern period began, insofar as it rejects the role of essence as kind-determining. As we will now see, Leibniz follows the same trajectory as Spinoza, though to an even greater extent, arguing that *all* of an entity's properties are essential to it.

Like Spinoza, Leibniz moves from considerations about what it takes to conceive an entity to what is included in its essence. Regarding the former, Leibniz famously holds that every property of a given substance belongs to what he calls its "complete notion" or concept:

The complete or perfect notion of an individual substance contains all of its predicates, past, present, and future. For certainly it is now true that a future predicate will be, and so it is contained in the notion of a thing. And thus everything that will happen to Peter or Judas, both necessary and free, is contained in the perfect individual notion of Peter and Judas ... ("Primary Truths", GA 32)

We have said that the notion of an individual substance includes once and for all everything that can ever happen to it and that, by considering this notion, one can see there everything that can truly be said of it, just as we can see in the nature of a circle all the properties that can be deduced from it.¹⁸ (*Discourse on Metaphysics* §13)

As indicated by the latter passage's reference to "the nature of" the target entity, Leibniz often treats the complete notion of a thing as equivalent to its essence. Elsewhere he makes the equivalence fully explicit, speaking of "the essence or individual notion of a substance" (*Discourse on Metaphysics* §16). Consider also Leibniz's remark that

[A] thing can remain the same, though changed, if from its very nature it follows that the same thing must pass successively through different states. I myself am said, indeed, to be the same as I was before, because my substance involves all my past, present and future states. (*Notationes Generales*, A 6.4.556)

If "my substance involves all my ... states" or properties, then my complete notion does so as well. Since my complete notion is equivalent to my essence, it follows that my essence involves all my properties. Since the reasoning is perfectly general, it follows that the essence of every entity includes all of that entity's properties.¹⁹

Leibniz embraces the implications of this maximally inclusive approach to essence, insisting that even the most arbitrary-seeming properties of a thing are essential to it, and that since they belong to the entities' complete notion, they can be known *a priori* (i.e., independently of sense experience):

God, seeing Alexander's individual notion or haecceity, sees in it at the same time the basis and reason for all the predicates which can be said truly of him, for example, that he vanquished Darius and Porus; he even knows *a priori* (and not by experience) whether he died a natural death or whether he was poisoned, something we can know only through history. (*Discourse on Metaphysics* §8)

It, therefore, also follows that he would not have been our Adam, but another Adam, had other events happened to him. (AG 72–73; cp. *Discourse on Metaphysics* §30)

Leibniz’s move to maximal inclusivity has significant repercussions for the theoretical roles of essence. First, on a fully inclusive view of essence, essential properties do not explain non-essential properties, for the simple fact that there are no properties of the latter sort to be explained.²⁰ Second, like Spinoza, Leibniz is committed to denying that essence is kind-determining. According to Leibniz, no two distinct individuals share an essence; therefore, no individual essence determines membership in a general kind.²¹ Not only being rational, but also vanquishing Darius and Porus, in the case of Alexander the Great, or eating from the forbidden fruit, in the case of Adam, belongs to their respective essences—as well as all their other properties. Once more, each substance is *sui generis*.

What explains Spinoza’s and Leibniz’s commitment to an inclusive view of essence? A full answer, which will likely point to multiple factors, goes beyond the scope of this short chapter.²² But we have already seen one consideration that is important to both philosophers, namely, the connection between essence and conception. Both Spinoza and Leibniz hold that to fully conceive of something is to grasp what it is to be that thing—hence, its essential properties.²³ Consequently, an entity’s essence encompasses whatever is required to fully conceive of it. Each philosopher endorses an expansive view of what is required to fully conceive of an entity: one must conceive its causal properties in Spinoza’s case, or *all* of its properties, in Leibniz’s case. Either way, the result is an inclusive view of essence.

3.4 Second Countermovement: Locke

The final position I would like to examine consists in a different kind of rejection of the traditional view of essence than the one implied by superessentialism. In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke (1632–1704) famously distinguishes two types of essence, the first of which he calls “real”:

First, Essence may be taken for the very being of anything, whereby it is what it is. And thus the real internal, but generally (in substances) unknown constitution of things, whereon their discoverable qualities depend, may be called their essence. (*Essay*, III.iii.15)

In contrast, what Locke calls “nominal” essences are “nothing else but, those abstract complex ideas, to which we have annexed distinct general names” (*Essay*, III.iii.17), which, in our ignorance of the real essences of things, we use to classify the latter as falling into kinds:

But, it being evident that things are ranked under names into sorts or species, only as they agree to certain abstract ideas, to which we have annexed those names, the [nominal] essence of each genus, or sort, comes to be nothing but that abstract idea which the general, or sortal (if I may have leave so to call it from sort, as I do general from genus), name stands for. (*Essay*, III.iii.15)

As a slogan, we may say that real essences are *in the world*, whereas nominal essences are *in the mind*.

We may use one of Locke’s recurring examples, a piece of gold, to illustrate this distinction.²⁴ The real essence of the piece consists in the insensible qualities that give rise to all its sensible

qualities: the latter include being yellow, heavy, fusible, malleable, soluble in *aqua regia*, tasteless, odorless, and so on. Its nominal essence consists in a complex idea of the mind, made from ideas of a certain *subset* of these sensible qualities. Anything that manifests the latter qualities will be classified by us as belonging to the kind gold.²⁵ In Locke's words,

supposing the nominal essence of gold to be a body of such a peculiar colour and weight, with malleability and fusibility, the real essence is that constitution of the parts of matter on which these qualities and their union depend (*Essay* III.vi.6)

Now, it is tempting to hold that under the best circumstances, our classificatory scheme captures genuine divisions in nature, kinds to which entities belong independently of our choice of that scheme. Nominal essences would then correspond to real essences, at least in the ideal case. Yet Locke argues that this position is unfounded. There is no reason to think that the qualities flagged by *any* classificatory scheme correspond to a genuine division in nature, even in the best circumstances. Instead, what he claims to be the "more rational" position is that any classificatory scheme is grounded on similarities that perceivers such as ourselves observe among the sensible qualities of things. (*Essay* III.iii.17) These observations lead us to divide those things into kinds. Rather than approximating the real essences of things, such divisions simply reflect how we happen to perceive those things.

It is often assumed that Locke's position is a version of skepticism rooted in his empiricism, and specifically, in his position that all ideas originate in sense perception. On this reading, Locke endorses the traditional notion of essence: the real essences of things are selective, kind-determining, and help to explain non-essential properties. Yet Locke's empiricism compels him to hold that because these essences are insensible, they are unknowable to us. So we could have no reason, founded solely on the natures of things, to group various entities together in one way rather than another. Consequently, our efforts to sort things into kinds according to their essences are bound to be arbitrary.

There is however an alternative interpretation of Locke's position that takes him instead to reject the traditional notion of essence. According to this interpretation,²⁶ an entity such as a piece of gold or a human being possesses a real essence, which is insensible (hence, given Locke's empiricism, unknowable) and explains the entity's sensible qualities. At the same time, these essences are not selective, and hence do not determine the kinds to which those entities belong. This is because essences are unique: each entity has its own essence, consisting in the insensible qualities possessed by it and it alone that give rise to *all* its sensible qualities.²⁷ It follows that the work of sorting things into kinds must be shouldered by something else.

This interpretation emphasizes that Locke is cognizant of the traditional notion of essence:

[T]hose who, using the word essence for they know not what, suppose a certain number of those essences, according to which all natural things are made, and wherein they do exactly every one of them partake, and so become of this or that species. (*Essay* III.iii.17)

Locke here acknowledges a view according to which essences explain non-essential, sensible properties, while also determining the kind or species to which the individual belongs ("and so become this or that species"). The problem, Locke seems to suggest, is that these two roles are in tension, and so one of them must go, and with it, the traditional notion of essence.

On the one hand, Locke reasons, if essence is to be kind-determining, then it must be selective. For it must include only those properties by virtue of which the entity is classified as

belonging to a particular kind. If Hypatia belongs to the kind human, for example, then her essence must contain only those properties, such as *being rational* and *being human*, possession of which determines her membership in this kind. On the other hand, if essence is to explain all of an entity's sensible properties, then it must be inclusive. For it must include sufficiently many non-sensible properties of sufficiently many different types to explain all of the entity's sensible properties—including such things as the specific texture of Hypatia's hair, the particular skin tone of a particular region of her nose, and the distinctive sound of her laughter. This means that Hypatia's essence must include more than *being rational* and *being an animal*.

In short, Locke suggests that essences are kind-determining only if they are selective, but they explain an entity's sensible properties only if they are inclusive. But essences cannot be both selective and inclusive. So we cannot hold that they are both kind-determining and explanatory of sensible properties. We must choose. Locke himself opts for the latter, replacing the former with a view on which kinds are human constructs.

What Locke tends to emphasize, however, is not the above tension per se, but rather what it implies for the utility of the traditional notion of essence. He writes:

For I would ask anyone, what is sufficient to make an essential difference in nature, between any two particular beings, without any regard had to some abstract idea, which is looked upon as the essence and standard of a species? All such patterns and standards, being quite laid aside, particular beings, considered barely in themselves, will be found to have all their qualities equally essential, and everything, in each individual, will be essential to it, or, which is more true, nothing at all. (*Essay* III.vi.5; see also III.vi.4 and 39)

We might summarize Locke's reasoning in this passage as follows. Nominal essences reflect perception and convention-dependent classificatory schemes. When these are "laid aside," we are left with real essences comprised of *all* of an entity's non-sensible properties, including sufficiently many properties of sufficiently many different types to explain all of the entity's sensible properties. They are all "equally essential" to it. But that is tantamount to saying that "nothing at all" is essential to it. Nothing useful is gained by labeling each and every one of the entity's non-sensible properties as essential.

What explains Locke's commitment to the inclusive view of essence that leads him to this conclusion? Above, I suggested that an explanation of Spinoza's and Leibniz's commitment to this view will reference their endorsement of a link between conception and essence. Since Locke's empiricism prohibits him from accepting any such link, we must look elsewhere to explain why he adopts the inclusive view. One plausible hypothesis is that it follows from his commitment to corpuscularianism, according to which the sensible qualities of bodies arise from properties of minute insensible parts or "corpuscles". Such a view does not privilege a subset of corpuscularian properties. Without some further reason to think that there is such a privileged subset, it is a quick step to the conclusion that either all of them are essential to an entity, or none are.

To conclude, we have seen that at the beginning of the early modern period, the traditional Aristotelian notion of essence as explanatory, kind-determining, and selective is very much still at play in the works of figures such as Descartes, Hobbes, Cavendish, and Conway. Later in the period we see movements away from this traditional view, towards superessentialism in the case of Spinoza and Leibniz, and towards a view of essence as theoretically useless in the case of Locke. What both movements have in common is their embrace of an inclusive view of essence that undermines its kind-determining role.²⁸

3.5 Related Topics

Ancient
 Medieval
 Modal Conceptions of Essence
 Non-Modal Conceptions of Essence
 Identity, Persistence, and Individuation
 Unity
 Conventionalism

Notes

- 1 Traditionally, an essence is, or is stated by, a real definition. For discussion of this connection, and of the Aristotelian tradition more broadly, see Chapters 1 and 2 in this volume. Throughout I use the terms “nature” and “essence” interchangeably.
- 2 For further discussion of the connection between essence and modality, see Chapters 7 and 8 in this volume.
- 3 On the theoretical roles of essence in contemporary philosophy, see Chapters 19 and 27 in this volume.
- 4 Essential properties were also taken to partly explain accidental properties; they did so together with other factors (e.g., environmental conditions). For example, Ockham writes: “it is clear to the senses that hot water, if left to its own nature, reverts to coldness” (*Quodlibet* III.6, cited in Pasnau 2011, §24.4). The cooler temperature, which is an accidental property of water, is explained by the nature of water, together with a feature of the environment, namely, the removal of a heat source.
- 5 This characterization applies to general kinds that do not admit of further division into subkinds, or to what Aristotle calls “lowest species” (see Chapter 1 in this volume).
- 6 Scholars tend to view Descartes as recognizing two and only two kinds, in contrast with the many kinds recognized by scholastic philosophers. Descartes however sometimes seems to allow for a greater plurality of kinds; see, e.g., the First Replies (CSM 2.84) and the Second Replies (CSM 2.106–7). For discussion, see Kaufman (2014) and Brown and Normore (2019, ch. 2).
- 7 See also *Leviathan* 34.2: a body “fills or occupies some certain room or imagined place, and depends not on the imagination, but is a real part of what we call the universe”.
- 8 Despite this and other similarities, Hobbes’s and Cavendish’s versions of materialism are significantly different. For a recent discussion, see Duncan (2022, chs. 2 and 4).
- 9 For an interesting discussion of Conway’s view of essences, see Grey (2020).
- 10 For example, they disagree about the ontological status of essences: like scholastic thinkers, Descartes, Cavendish, and Conway appear to be realists about essence, whereas Hobbes (1839–1845, 7: 221) adopts a deflationary approach, according to which essences are “words artificial belonging to the art of logic, and signify only the manner how we consider the substance itself”. See Pasnau (2011, §27.5) for helpful discussion.
- 11 As was said above, in note 6, Descartes arguably accepts a far narrower range of essences than most Aristotelians, and the same is true for the other early modern traditionalists we have discussed.
- 12 For Leibniz’s relation to Spinoza, see, e.g., Newlands (2018) and Laerke (2008).
- 13 For discussion of the causal axiom, see Lin (2020).
- 14 See, e.g., Della Rocca (2008, 93ff) and Newlands (2018, 115–16).
- 15 For a helpful overview and subsequent rejection of this line of argument, see Bender (forthcoming).
- 16 For further discussion of the explanatory role of essences in Spinoza, see Ward (2011), Viljanen (2008), Newlands (2018, ch. 5), and Bender (forthcoming).
- 17 The thesis that Spinozistic essences are unique, and therefore not kind-determining, is defended by, e.g., Martin (2008), Ward (2011), and Hübner (2015). While Spinoza sometimes does speak of shared, kind-determining essences, scholars have argued that on such occasions Spinoza is referring not to real essences, which are mind-independent, but rather, as Hübner (2015, 16ff) puts it, to “mind-dependent species-essences, constructed by finite minds but grounded in actual, recognized similarities”.
- 18 For further discussion of Leibniz’s doctrine of complete notions, including textual sources, see di Bella (2004, ch. 1 and 2018).

- 19 See, e.g., Mates (1972), Mondadori (1973), and Look (2013) for this very common line of interpretation. For challenges to it, see, e.g., Cover and Hawthorne (1999), Adams (1994, pp. 12ff), and Kim (manuscript). I am grateful to Jun Young Kim for helpful discussions of this literature.
- 20 At the same time, as we have seen, Leibniz says of Alexander the Great that his individual notion—and hence his essence—is “the basis and reason” for all his properties. Perhaps the thought here is that among the essential properties, some are more fundamental, and thus explain other, less fundamental essential properties.
- 21 It is open to Leibniz to hold, in departure from the tradition, that only a subset of an entity’s essential properties determines the kind to which it belongs—e.g., in the case of Alexander the Great and Adam, their rationality and animality. For an interpretation of Leibniz as indeed holding this view, see Look (2009).
- 22 See Ward (2011) and Di Bella (2018) for discussion of some of the motivating factors behind, respectively, Spinoza’s and Leibniz’s inclusive view of essence.
- 23 This is arguably a version of the traditional link between essence and definition mentioned in note 1.
- 24 See, e.g., *Essay* III.iii.18.
- 25 Here I have in mind what Owen (1991, 107) calls “the real essence of an unsorted particular,” by contrast with “the real essence of a sorted particular”. While the former is a set of insensible qualities that give rise to *all* the entity’s sensible qualities, the latter is the subset of insensible qualities that give rise to the subset of sensible qualities comprising the entity’s nominal essence.
- 26 This interpretation is drawn from the discussion in Pasnau (2011, §27.7). Versions of it are also proposed in Owen (1991), Phemister (1990), and Look (2009).
- 27 The real essence of an individual is distinct from its substratum: the former consists of a collection of insensible qualities; the latter is not a collection of qualities but something that has or “supports” qualities. See *Essay* III.ii.23 for Locke’s discussion of substratum.
- 28 I am grateful to Sebastian Bender, Kathrin Koslicki, Michael Raven, Dominik Perler, and participants in the Theoretical Philosophy Colloquium at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to John Bengson for extensive help with this article.

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