

## ESSENTIALISM

With each object comes a twofold distinction among properties: on the one side are the properties the object possesses, and on the other are the ones it lacks. The \*essentialist\* is someone who maintains a further distinction among properties of the first sort, counting certain of these 'essential' to their bearer and the rest only 'accidental'. The hard part is to explain what 'essential' means.

By all accounts, a thing's essential properties are the ones it needs to possess to be the thing it is. But this can be taken in several ways. Traditionally it was held that F is essential to x iff to be F is part of 'what x is', as elucidated in x's definition (see ARISTOTLE). Since the 1950s, however, this \*definitional\* conception of essence has been losing ground to the \*modal\* conception: x is essentially F iff necessarily, whatever is x possesses F; equivalently, x must be F to exist at all (see NECESSITY). Another approach, not discussed here, conceives x's essential properties as those underlying and accounting for the bulk of its other properties (see LOCKE). This entry emphasises the modal conception of essentiality.

Acquiescence in \*some\* form of the essential/accidental distinction appears to be implicit in the very practice of metaphysics. For what interests the metaphysician is not just any old feature of a thing, but the properties that make it the thing it is. So much is to say that the essential/ accidental distinction helps to demarcate the subject matter of metaphysics. But it also constitutes a part of that subject matter. If objects have certain of their properties in a specially fundamental way, then this is a phenomenon of great metaphysical significance.

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### 1 Antiessentialism

Essentialists have two basic commitments: to the essential/accidental distinction as such, and to the existence of properties of both types. Accordingly there are two main schools of antiessentialism. \*Skeptical\* antiessentialists reject the very idea of essential vs. accidental, while \*trivializing\* antiessentialists insist that all or nearly all properties fall on the same side of the

line.

Skeptics typically argue as follows. Whether  $x$  is essentially  $F$  is supposed to turn on whether it is *necessary* that  $x$  be  $F$ . But this leads to contradictions. Is nine essentially greater than seven? Yes, because nine is seven plus two, and it is necessary that seven plus two exceeds seven. Yet also no, for nine is the number of planets, and it need not have been that the numbers of planets exceeded seven. The only way out is to admit that nothing is essentially  $F$  *as such* but only as described in a certain way. So-called 'essential' properties are really just properties entailed by some currently salient description.

What ought to make us suspicious is that similar worries can be raised about intuitively quite innocent distinctions, such as that between a thing's *constant* properties -- those that it *always* possesses -- and its *temporary* ones. While it is always the case that seven plus two exceeds seven, the number of planets was (let's imagine) once six. Described one way, then, nine is constantly greater than seven, while described another it is only temporarily greater than seven.

Here the fallacy seems clear. For purposes of assessing constancy, 'it is always the case that the  $D$  is  $F$ ' must be read *de re*: 'concerning the object which is in fact the  $D$ , *it* is always  $F$ .' Read *de re*, the objector's claim that at one time the number of planets was six is simply false. Mightn't a similar response be available to the essentialist? It certainly might, *unless* the skeptic can convince us that *de re* modal talk is less intelligible than its temporal analogue.

Skeptics have tried, complaining that there is nothing on the modal side to match our well-developed criteria of identity over time. But since the latter criteria have clear transworld implications (that a thing can evolve in thus and such ways shows it to be capable of thus and such otherworldly careers), it is hard to motivate an invidious distinction here. Anyway, few essentialists would grant the skeptic's assumption that without transworld identity criteria, *de re* modal discourse becomes emptied of content. If anything, content flows in the other direction; to call a counterfactual object identical to  $x$  is just to say that its properties are *ipso facto* properties  $x$  *could* have possessed.

Now let's turn to the trivializer's claim that all, or nearly all, of a thing's properties are accidental; or else that all, or nearly all, are essential. The second idea seems to be present in Leibniz, who holds that Adam would not have existed had Peter not gone on to deny Christ some thousands of years after his death. (Even today one encounters it in remarks like 'if the pistol had been equipped with a silencer, a death would have resulted, but not the *same*'

death.') This 'superessentialism' is often backed by a strikingly unconvincing line of argument, viz. that the indiscernibility of identicals rules out a possible  $x$  differing from our actual  $x$  in any way. (See G.E. Moore, 'External and Internal Relations', for a devastating critique.) Anyway the other style of trivialization is far more common.

Not every property can be accidental, because it is sometimes necessary just as a matter of logic that  $x$  be  $F$ . So, for every  $x$  whatsoever, logic tells us that  $x$  is round if round. Since what logic tells us is necessary, \*being round if round\* is essential to  $x$ . But perhaps the trivializer will try to draw the line at these \*logically essential\* properties, counting all other properties accidental.

Such an approach will seem more trivializing than it is if one supposes that a property logically essential to one thing is thereby logically essential to everything. \*Identity with  $x$ \* is the obvious counterexample; it is logically necessary that  $x = x$  but not that  $y = x$ , so \*identity with  $x$ \* comes out essential to  $x$  alone.

Now though it becomes hard not to allow additional properties as essential. Without accidental identity, for example, how can there be accidental distinctness? Apparently then nine, in addition to being essentially identical to nine, should be reckoned essentially distinct from seven. But to be identical to seven, another \*number\* after all, would seem to be \*less\* contrary to nine's nature than to be an entirely different \*kind\* of thing, such as a painting or person. Once we recognize non-membership in these \*other\* kinds as essential to nine, there seems little point in refusing to count it essentially a member of its \*actual\* kind, that is, essentially a number. By this point, we have shed our former colors and taken on a modest and unassuming essentialism.

## 2 Grades of Essential Involvement

Nearly all essentialists regard at least kind-properties as essential: Aristotle is essentially human, the set of horses is essentially a set, 'Cow's Skull' is essentially a painting, and so on. But it is common to go further and conceive a thing's kind as the key to its essential properties more generally. The simplest version of this 'priority of kinds' doctrine maintains that (ignoring identity-properties and other such trivia) the essential properties of a  $K$  are first, to be a  $K$ , and second, whatever being a  $K$  entails. Thus while  $K$ s have different essences than things of other kinds, between themselves all  $K$ s are essentially alike.

Yet there might be reasons for allowing essential differences

\*within\* a kind. Doesn't each set, for instance, have its specific membership essentially, and isn't each painting essentially due to its actual painter? Such a view may seem at odds with the the priority of kinds doctrine; but the conflict is only superficial, for we can understand a thing's kind to dictate, not the essentiality of this or that specific property, but the essentiality of its properties of such and such \*types\*, whatever those properties may in fact be. So, Kripke proposes that a person essentially derives from whatever gametes she in fact derives from. 'How could a person originating from different parents, from a totally different sperm and egg, be \*this very woman\*?' Again, 'could \*this table\* have been made from a completely \*different\* block of wood, or even of water cleverly hardened into ice...?' It could not and so the table essentially originated in \*this\* block of wood or one sufficiently like it.

Now that we are countenancing essential differences among conspecifics, we might wonder how deep these differences run; indeed whether each object emerges with a uniquely identifying modal profile. By an \*individual essence\* of x, let's mean a collection of properties such that

- (a) necessarily, whatever has these properties is x, and
- (b) necessarily, whatever is x has these properties.

The second clause asks for properties necessitated by \*identity with x\*, that is, properties essential to x. But where shall we look for properties with the further feature, demanded by the first clause, that to possess them is \*sufficient\* for identity with x? Of course, the property of \*identity with x\* handles the job easily. But a property whose identity itself depends on x's seems ill-suited to the task of singling x out. Thus our problem becomes one of finding individual essences untainted by identity-properties and similar trivia. Essentialists of an Aristotelian bent call this impossible:

to make clear which thing a thing is, it is not enough (\*pace\* the friends of the logically particularized essence) to say however lengthily that it is \*such\*, or \*so and so\*.

Opposing this pessimism are, first, the Carnapian strategy of specifying x's identity through a world-by-world catalogue of its properties, and second, Forbes's idea of identifying it as the unique entity of its kind originating in a certain way from certain other entities (its members if x is a set, its original matter if x is an artefact, its gametes if x is an organism, and so on).

Note that the second approach does not offer to identify objects in purely qualitative terms, but only in terms of prior objects. This is not objectionable in itself but it does leave a puzzle about items to which nothing is prior, say, coexistent eternal

particles of the same kind. How will their essences differ? (Faced with a similar problem, Aquinas decided that each angel was a species unto itself.) Proponents of the first approach can say that for each particle, there is a world where it exists all by itself. But since these worlds are not themselves distinguishable except in terms of their solitary inhabitants, this leaves us not much further ahead. Ultimately, then, the Aristotelian may have a point; at least some identity facts will have to be taken as primitive and unexplained.

### 3 Essential Epistemology

Kant famously remarked that experience tells us how a thing *is*, but not that the thing could not have been otherwise. If this is true, how do we discover essential properties?

At least the outlines of an answer are set forth in Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*. Suppose that *x*'s essential properties flow from its kind *K* in the following sense: *x* is essentially *F* iff *x* is *F*, and *F* is a type of property that *K*s possess essentially if at all. Then to know *x*'s essential properties, it would be enough to know (i) its kind, (ii) which types of properties things of that kind possess essentially, and (iii) which properties of those types *x* actually possesses.

Can we claim access to this information? For at least many objects, it seems arguable that (ii) is knowable a priori and (iii) a posteriori. One knows a priori, for example, that paintings essentially derive from their actual painters, and a posteriori that Georgia O'Keefe painted 'Cow's Skull'. As for (i), the knowledge that 'Cow's Skull' is a painting, this involves a priori and a posteriori factors working together. Experience reveals that 'Cow's Skull' has a certain history, internal makeup, and so on, and it is a priori that these features suffice to make it a painting.

### 4 Applications

Apart from uses already mentioned, what is the essential/accidental distinction good for? From Descartes on, many have seen its potential as a counter to identity theses. The argument is simple. Identicals are indiscernible, so if *x* has a feature essentially that is at best accidental to *y*, then *x* and *y* are distinct. Allowing that my body is essentially extended and that I am not, it follows that I am distinct from my body. If the tree in the quad can exist without my idea of it, then since the same cannot be said of my idea, my idea is not the tree.

Yet the argument might appear to prove too much. Imagine a statue that is always composed of the same hunk of clay, while the

clay, for its part, always composes the statue. Given their overwhelming similarity, the statue and the clay might well seem identical. True, the statue is essentially humanoid in form while the clay would survive reshaping into a ball. But are we really to conclude, on the basis of such a subtle difference, that the statue and its clay are two distinct objects?

So-called 'one-thingers' suspect a fallacy of equivocation. Putting 'the clay' for 'the statue' in 'the statue is essentially humanoid' alters its truth-value, all right, but is this due to a change in subject matter or a change in what is said about that subject matter? Perhaps the substitution works to deflect attention from the property of having humanoid \*statue\*-counterparts to that of having humanoid \*clay\*-counterparts. That two separate properties are involved removes the need for a distinction between the objects. (See COUNTERPART THEORY.)

'Two-thingers' urge us to accept the distinction while rethinking its significance. If objects as similar as a statue and its clay can fail to be identical, then non-identity is not \*per se\* a very powerful conclusion. This makes life harder for philosophers promoting substantive forms of dualism; they must now explain what beyond mere non-identity they intend, and what beyond merely essential differences they can offer as evidence. But life becomes easier for those struggling to understand the various intimate identity-\*like\* relations so important in recent metaphysics; for instance, the relations between material objects and their constitutive matter, between actions and their associated bodily movements, between mental states and the physical states that realize them, and between fine-grained events occupying the same spatiotemporal region. The last example will be developed further since it sets up one final application of essentialism, to the problem of causation.

What is the relation between the Titanic's sinking so swiftly and its sinking as such? Both events were swift but only the first, arguably, \*had\* to be so. This comes out in the fact that the Titanic's sinking might have stretched out over days or weeks (suppose that certain hatches had held) whereas its \*swiftly\* sinking could not have been that prolonged. Of course it is not just in this respect that the events differ. That the hatches broke was crucial to the ship's swiftly sinking, but no factor at all in its sinking as such; and we can imagine that it was the ship's sinking as such (not its sinking so swiftly) that led to the navigator's dismissal. Is this only happenstance or can we find a theory of causation capable of 'predicting' the events' causal differences on the basis of their essential ones? A counterfactual theory looks promising since the conditions under which an event would not have occurred are visibly sensitive to its essential properties.

## 5 Conceptions of essentiality

To this point we've been understanding an essential property of  $x$  as a property that  $x$  cannot exist without. But although this is the going conception of essentiality, even its advocates admit that it suffers from certain anomalies. The first and best-known concerns the property of existence. Since it's impossible to exist without existing, the modal conception extends to absolutely everything a compliment normally reserved for God, viz. essential existence. The problem arises because of the way we conditionalize on existence in the definition of an essential property. Suppose then that we drop the existence condition and define  $x$ 's essential properties simply as the ones it must possess, regardless of whether it exists or not. This has the desired effect of eliminating essential existence for contingent beings, but at a cost: no property presupposing existence can be essential to such beings either. So, since to be human one must exist, you and I are not essentially human; hence, perhaps, not human at all.

Now to a second and deeper problem. A thing's essential properties are supposed to be the properties that make it the thing it is. But the modal conception has no way of distinguishing the properties that \*make\*  $x$  the thing it is from the ones it has as a necessary \*result\* of being that thing; it cannot distinguish the \*conditions\* of  $x$ 's identity from the \*consequences\* of its identity. This is clearest in the case of universally necessary properties like that of \*being an element of gold\*, or \*being such that  $2+3=5$ \*. Neither helps make Aristotle the thing he is, but since nothing can be Aristotle without them, the modal conception reckons them essential. Now consider Aristotle's not-universally-necessary property of being distinct from the Eiffel Tower. This is not a factor in Aristotle's identity, or to explain what Aristotle was, we would have to mention every other object, past, present and future. Nevertheless, the modal conception calls it essential to Aristotle to be distinct from the Eiffel Tower. A final example seems decisive. To go by the modal conception, Aristotle's membership in {Aristotle} is essential to man and set alike. But the truth is surely different: although it lies in the set's nature to contain the man, the man's membership in the set seems not a condition of his identity but a consequence of it. No purely modal account can deliver this result; the case presents no modal asymmetries whatever, hence none for a modal account to exploit.

Troubled by these anomalies, Fine has urged a revival of the definitional conception of essence. With each object  $x$ , he associates a proposition  $D(x)$  to function as  $x$ 's 'real definition'. The properties essential to  $x$  are those that can be assigned to it just on the basis of  $D(x)$ , with no help from any other source. Assuming suitable definitions, this approach allows him to resist the unwelcome essential attributions of the last few paragraphs. Aristotle's definition makes no mention of the Eiffel Tower, so it cannot

pronounce on the two objects' relations. Since {Aristotle}'s definition describes it as containing Aristotle, but not the other way around, their relationship will be essential to the set only.

Not every modally essential property will be definitionally essential, but there is room for debate about the converse hypothesis. Suppose I make a statue out of the one hunk of clay in my studio. Then in defining the statue -- in explaining what it is -- I will say that it was created out of this hunk of clay. I will say this *\*despite\** the fact that a distinct but sufficiently overlapping hunk would have resulted in the very same statue. (In explaining what the statue *\*is\**, why would I mention the various objects it *\*could\** have been fashioned from?) So, *\*originating in this hunk of clay\** looks like an example of a definitionally essential property that isn't modally essential. Yet it could equally be argued that since the statue did not *\*need\** to originate in the given clay, originating in that clay is not a condition of identity with the statue; hence it should not be considered essential even on the definitional approach.

Disputes like this forces a closer look at the phrase 'conditions of identity with x'. Due to a familiar ambiguity in 'condition', this can mean either the necessary *\*prerequisites\** of identity with x (the properties a thing would have to have in order to be x); or the factors actually *\*constituting\** its identity (the properties that x actually possesses by which it succeeds in being x). Deriving from this particular hunk of clay may not be *\*required\** for identity with the statue, but it seems still to be essential in the constitutive sense. To have derived from the given clay is part of what it *\*is\**, even if not part of what it *\*had\** to be, to be that statue.

So we end up with three conceptions of essential property, depending on whether x's essential properties are understood as (1) the necessary *\*prerequisites\** of identity with x, (2) the factors actually *\*constituting\** x's identity, or (3) the necessary *\*consequences\** of being x. (3) expresses the modal conception of essentiality. (2) is a fully de-modalized version of the definitional conception. (1) lies somewhere between; it is the definitional conception but with a modal twist. Each of the three seems worthy of further study.

See also: ARISTOTLE, COUNTERPART THEORY, DEFINITION, DE RE AND DE DICTO, IDENTITY, LOCKE, MODAL LOGIC, NECESSITY AND POSSIBILITY

References and further reading



\*K.Fine (1993) 'The Concept of Essence' \*Philosophical Perspectives\* 8 (Basis for much of §1 and §5. Critiques modal conception of essence and revives definitional conception.)

\*G.Forbes (1985) \*The Metaphysics of Modality\*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. (Cited in §2 as defending individual essences. Excellent overall treatise on \*de re\* modality.)

\*S. Kripke (1972) \*Naming and Necessity\*, reprinted in 1980, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (Cited in §§2-3. Extremely important. Argues for essentiality of kinds and origins, and sketches a \*de re\* modal epistemology.)

D. Lewis (1971) 'Counterparts of Persons and Their Bodies', \*Journal of Philosophy\* 68; 203-11 (Defends 'one-thingism' using counterpart theory. See §4.)

\*G.E. Moore (1919) 'External and Internal Relations', reprinted 1922 in \*Philosophical Studies\*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (Cited in §2. Early statement of the modal conception of essence.)

W.V. Quine (1954) 'Reference and Modality', reprinted 1961 in \*From a Logical Point of View\*, New York: Harper & Row (Argues for skeptical antiessentialism. See §1.)

A.Sidelle (1989) \*Necessity, Essence, and Individuation\*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. (Defends a sophisticated conventionalism about essential properties.)

\*D.Wiggins (1980) \*Sameness and Substance\*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Cited in §2. Stresses essentiality of kinds and connections with transtemporal identity.)

\*S.Yablo (1987) 'Identity, Essence, & Indiscernibility' \*Journal of Philosophy\* 84, 293-314. (Expands on §2 and §4.)