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Essentialism

Metaphysical essentialism is related to the Platonic idea that any thing has an internal essence, without which it would not be what it “is.” Twentieth-century “existentialists” denied that things have an essence that precedes their existence, as PLATO believed.

Aristotle was skeptical about Plato’s “Ideas” or “Forms” that a demiurge used in the creation of things, but Aristotle did accept the idea of a “telos” or purpose, his “final cause.” For artifacts, the telos is put into the object by the artificer. For living things, Aristotle thought the telos was an internal property that he called *entelechy*, from *en-tel-echein* - having a telos within.

Over the centuries, some philosophers have hoped to identify various essences that are essential components of various kinds of things. In modern philosophy, there is talk of “natural kinds,” which suggest that each “kind” has one or more properties that are essential to being that kind.

JOHN LOCKE was skeptical about essences in general, like the Platonic Ideas, being used to make up the essence of an individual

“’Tis true, there is ordinarily supposed a real Constitution of the sorts of Things; and ’tis past doubt, there must be some real Constitution, on which any Collection of simple Ideas co-existing, must depend. 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 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. And this we shall find to be that which the word Essence imports, in its most familiar use.”¹

Intrinsic Information as Essence

In information philosophy, identity depends on the total information in an object or concept. We can “pick out” the *intrinsic information* as that which is “self-identical” in an object – the

1 Locke (1690) *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III.iii.15



“peculiar qualifications” of the individual. This suggests a precise definition of the “essence” of an object, what is “essential” about it.

A subset of the intrinsic information may be essential with respect to (*qua*) some concept of the object. As EDMUND HUSSERL emphasized, our concepts about objects depend on our intentions, our intended uses of the object, which give it different (pragmatic) meanings. We can say that an essence is the subset of an object’s information that is *isomorphic* to the information in the concept. These essences are subjective, but we can define an objective essence as the total *intrinsic* information.

Two numerically distinct objects can be perfectly identical ($x = x$) internally, if their intrinsic information content is identical. Relational (extrinsic) information with other objects and positions in space and time is ignored. The Greeks called intrinsic information *pros heauto* or *idios poion*. ARISTOTLE and the Stoics called this the peculiar qualities of an individual. They may be loosely considered the “essence” of the individual.

The Stoics distinguished these peculiar properties from the material substrate, which they called *hupokeimenon*, the “underlying.” *Extrinsic* information is found in an object’s relations with other objects and space and time. The Greek terms for relations were *pros ta alla*, toward others, and *pros ti pos echon*, relatively disposed. Aristotle would have called these relative properties accidentals (*symbebekos*). They play no role in the essence.

Even two distinct objects can be considered essentially the same if they are of the same *sort* or of a *natural kind*.

Natural Kinds and Mereological Essentialism

Natural kinds may be described as sharing an essence, or being relatively identical *qua* that essence, which may be a single property or some bundle of properties.

Natural kinds are sometimes said to “carve nature at its joints,” as Plato put it in the *Phaedrus*.

Essentialism has its roots in Aristotle’s definition of the essence (*ουσία*), the unchanging “Being” of an object. Is “Essentialism” metaphysically valid or only an analytic language claim?



The essence of an object, the “kind” or “sort” of object that it “is,” its “constitution,” its “identity,” includes those “proper” parts of the object without which it would cease to be that sort or kind. It would lose its identity.

Mereology is the study of parts and is historically the decomposition of an entity into its components, the parts which “compose” the whole. Some of these may be “proper parts,” but in what sense can we say that? Others may be merely parts that we have picked out to focus on and have given names. They may in no way be “natural” parts, kinds, or sorts.

Aristotle knew that most living things can survive the loss of various parts (limbs, for example), but not others (the head, say). By analogy, he thought that other objects (and even concepts) could have parts (or properties) that are essential to its definition and other properties or qualities that are merely accidental. Mereological essentialism should be the study of those essential parts.

As we saw in chapter 8, RODERICK CHISHOLM defined “mereological essentialism,” the idea that if some object has parts, then those parts are essential, metaphysically necessary, to the particular object.

No doubt some parts are essential, in the sense that the brain or heart is essential to a human being. But surely not every part of any whole is a necessary part in all possible worlds? As Aristotle said, some parts may be accidental. And some parts may not persist as criteria of the object’s “identity through time.”

