The Essence of Essence

Modal *vs*. Aristotelian Essentialism

Two Distinctions

- Essentialism Motivated
- Essentialism Clarified
- Challenges to Essentialism

Essentialism Motivated

- Two categories of properties: deep and shallow.
  - Some features S might well lose while continuing to exist.
    - For instance, Socrates would continue to exist if he lost his pallor by spending the day at the beach.
    - Call these *shallow properties*.
  - Some features are such that should S lose them, S would cease to exist.
    - For instance, Socrates would cease to exist if he were put into a compactor and forged into a doorknob. Along the way, he would lose, for instance, the property being human, since no doorknob is a human being.
    - Call these *deep properties*.
  - The difference between deep and shallow properties has traditionally thought to approximate a distinction between *essence* and *accident*.

Essence and Modality

- One proposal: essential properties are just those a subject has *necessarily*.
  - Let us call this the *merely modal theory of essence* (MMTE):
    - ϕ is an essential property of x $=_{df}$ necessarily, x is ϕ.
      - This is just to say, then, that x cannot exist without being ϕ.
    - ϕ is an accidental property of x $=_{df}$ (i) x is ϕ; and (ii) possibly, x is not-ϕ.

MMTE Rejected

- Various properties are trivially true of everything that exists:
  - logical and categorial properties
    - (i) being red or not-red; (ii) being identical with the number nine or not
  - set theoretic properties
    - Socrates is necessarily a member of the singleton set {Socrates}.
- These properties do not tell us *what* their bearer is.
- Further, some properties stand in asymmetric dependency relations to others, even though they are equally necessary.
  - The deeper properties here are candidates for being essential.

Aristotelian Essentialism (AE)

- As traditionally conceived, philosophical definitions (seek to) reveal the essence-specifying features of things; essences constitute the natures of their bearers.
- So, e.g., Socrates is essentially rational.
  - He is also necessarily capable of grammar, though an account of his grammatically asymmetrically depends upon an account of his rationality.
  - This remains so even though: Necessarily, Socrates is rational iff Socrates is capable of grammar.
- AE: ϕ is an essential property of x $=_{df}$ (i) necessarily, x is ϕ; and (ii) ϕ is in an objective sense an explanatorily basic feature of x.

Quine’s Challenge

1. Mathematicians are necessarily rational, but not necessarily two-legged.

2. Cyclists are necessarily two-legged, but not necessarily rational.

3. There is at least one cycling mathematician, namely Ricky.

4. If (1), Ricky is necessarily rational; if (2) Ricky is not necessarily rational.

5. If (2), Ricky is necessarily two-legged; if (1), Ricky is not necessarily two-legged.

6. So, Ricky is and is not necessarily rational; and Ricky is and is not necessarily two-legged.

7. If (1) and (2), as arbitrarily selected examples of necessary and contingent properties, lead to such flagrant contradictions, then the necessary/contingent distinction (and with it, the essential/accidental distinction) is untenable and must be rejected.

8. So, the necessary/contingent distinction (and with it, the essential/accidental distinction) is untenable and must be rejected.

De Dicto and *De Re*

- Necessity *de dicto* and *de re*
  - Necessity *de dicto*: a proposition (*dictum*) has the property of being necessarily true.
    - It is necessary that all bachelors are unmarried.
    - It is necessary that nine is greater than five.
  - Necessity *de re*: some entity (*res*) has a property necessarily.
    - Ricky is necessarily rational.
    - This square is necessarily four-sided.

Applied to Quine's Challenge

- (1) and (2) may each be taken either *de re* or *de dicto.* Thus:
  - Taken *de dicto*, we have:
  - (1_{dd}) It is necessarily true that mathematicians are rational.
  - (2_{dd}) It is necessarily true that cyclists are two-legged.
  - Taken *de re*, we have:
    - (1_{dr}) Every mathematician has the property of being necessarily rational.
    - (2_{dr}) Every cyclist has the property of being necessarily two-legged.
- Taken *de dicto*, then (1) and (2), as (1_{dd}) and (2_{dd}), are unobjectionable. But then we cannot accept (4) and (5) and the subsequent inference to (6).
- Taken *de re*, as (2_{dr}), (2) is false. (It is not the case that every cyclist has the property of being necessarily two-legged.) So, (4), (5), and (6) cannot be derived.

Quine's Baffllement

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6. So, Ricky is and is not necessarily rational; and Ricky is and is not necessarily two-legged.

7. If (1) and (2), as arbitrarily selected examples of necessary and contingent properties, lead to such flagrant contradictions, then the necessary/contingent distinction (and with it, the essential/accidental distinction) is untenable and must be rejected.

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The Purport

- These contentions do not undermine the traditional more-than-merely-modal distinction into essence and accident.

- So far, then, the intuitive distinction between shallow and deep properties, explicated as Aristotelian Essentialism, remains unscathed.

- So, the distinction between essential and accidental properties remains viable.

Binding and Sortal Essentialism

- Essence$_1$: simple *de re* necessity.
- Essence$_2$: binding *de re* necessity.
- Essence$_3$: sortal necessity.

Essence$_1$: simple *de re*

- ϕ is an essential$_1$ property of *a* =$_{df}$ regardless of how one specifies *a*, *a* is necessarily ϕ
  - So, for example, the number 6 is necessarily even.
    - If it is true that 6 is Liu's lucky number, then Liu's lucky number is necessarily even.
      - It's of course *not* true that it is necessary *that Liu's lucky number is even*.
        - Liu, being fickle, might just change her lucky number to 7, without notice.

Essence$_2$: binding *de re*

- ϕ is an essential$_2$ property of *a* $=_{df}$ (i) *a* is essentially$_1$ ϕ; and (ii) anything which has ϕ has ϕ necessarily.
  - So, e.g., one might say, this human is essentially$_1$ ϕ (say, rational), but this android is contingently ϕ.
  - On this second conception: being essential *binds* an entity to its kind.
  - Further, it is not possible that we have any ϕ where ϕa and ϕb are such that *a* is essentially ϕ while *b* is contingently ϕ.
    - Compare, then, *being human* and *being red*
      - It seems that magenta is essentially (or at least necessarily) red; Olaf's barn is now red and now white.
      - Perhaps, by contrast, whatever is a human is essentially a human; nothing is such that it is now a human and now a barn (or a fish or a doorknob. . .)
        - Yet may we not say that this body, or this quantity of matter is now a human and now not a human?
          - If so, then whereas Socrates is essentially a human, his body is only contingently a human.

Essence$_3$: sortal necessity

- ϕ is an essential$_3$ property of *a* $=_{df}$ (i) *a* is necessarily sorted *up* by ϕ; (ii) *a* is necessarily sorted *down* by ϕ; and (iii) *a* is not sorted *across* by ϕ.

  - sorted up: *a* is ϕ, and is not a proper part of anything that is ϕ.

  - sorted down: *a* is ϕ, and has no proper part which is ϕ.

  - sorted across: possibly, some things are not-ϕ.

Aristotle on Sortal Necessity

- . . .for it is impossible for a thing still to remain the same if it is entirely transferred out of its species, just as the same animal could not at one time be, and at another not be, a man. (*Topics* 125b37-9)

- This implies (or near enough states), that nothing can switch from one essential kind to another.

Neo-Aristotelian Essence

- As traditionally conceived, philosophical definitions (seek to) reveal the essence-specifying features of things; essences constitute the natures of their bearers.
  - So, e.g., Socrates is essentially rational.
    - He is also necessarily capable of grammar, though an account of his grammatically asymmetrically depends upon an account of his rationality.
- This remains so even though: Necessarily, Socrates is rational *iff* Socrates is capable of grammar.
- AE: ϕ is an essential property of x $=_{df}$ (i) necessarily, x is bindingly ϕ; and (ii) ϕ is in an objective sense an explanatorily basic feature of x.