

Quine against Essence

But in connection with the modalities it yields something baffling—more so even than the modalities themselves; viz., talk of a difference between necessary and contingent attributes of an object. Perhaps I can evoke the appropriate sense of bewilderment as follows. Mathematicians may conceivably be said to be necessarily rational and not necessarily two-legged; and cyclists necessarily two-legged and not necessarily rational. But what of an individual who counts among his eccentricities both mathematics and cycling? Is this concrete individual necessarily rational and contingently two-legged or vice versa? Just insofar as we are talking referentially of the object, with no special bias toward a background grouping of mathematicians as against cyclists or vice versa, there is no semblance of sense in rating some of his attributes as necessary and others as contingent. Some of his attributes count as important and others as unimportant, yes; some as enduring and others as fleeting; but none as necessary or contingent.

—Quine (1960, 199)

Curiously, a philosophical tradition does exist for just such a distinction between necessary and contingent attributes. It lives on in the terms 'essence' and 'accident'. . . It is a distinction that one attributes to Aristotle (subject to contradiction by scholars, such being the penalty for attributions to Aristotle). But, however venerable the distinction, it is surely indefensible. . .

—Quine (1960, 199-200)