Essence and its representation: Kripke, Quine and Wittgenstein

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Abstract

The simplest way to characterize essences is to say that it makes a thing what it is.

An object must have something very basic, unique, and intrinsic and more fundamental by which we can identify an object as it is. We always have a tendency to hold on something stable and discarding what is accidental and unstable. That means there is a neat dichotomy between the core vs the periphery, the central vs the margin, the permanent vs the temporary, the nec vs the possibility, the inner vs the outer. That means an object must have some properties that are essential for it and some other accidental.

Now, question arises whether this basic property belongs to a particular individual or to a group. Is it unique to just one thing or these are mere concepts or ideas that are sharable or communicable or repetitive properties, or that is logically instantiable in a plurality of individuals.

An individual unlike a class is spatio-temporally cohesive, it forms a unified singular unit; and hence the way in which an essence can be said to bring the spatio-temporally scattered individuals under a fixed and unitary enclosure cannot meaningfully be applied to an individual itself. And yet the individual in spite of its apparently compact unity throws up a tension between its essence and accidents. With inanimate objects the shape, size and colour may change, leaving the constituent

matter intact. question arises whether it is a bare particular that persists and underlies through the change. Or whether it is a composite of all qualities, combination of all properties like both essential and accidental . Some philosophers will say we do not require any properties to identify the object in the actual world as well as in the possible world. Object itself directly enters into our identification in the actual world as well as in the possible world via properties. But some will say essence is commonly shareable property, we find essence in some fixed suchness. On the other hand, some of them tried to emphasize on the internal structure of language which is related to the reality of the world. By analyzing the ordinary language we can reduce it into its constituting parts and ultimately we arrive at an ideal language that cannot be further analyzed, they are atomic in nature, there is an one to one relation between the name and the object in reality.

1. Introduction

The simplest way to characterize essences is to say that it makes a thing what it is. The talk of 'essence' - both in the realm of common sense as well as in philosophical discourse - has a dominant rhetoric, based on a powerful appeal to our imagination. The following inventory of its synonyms range over the abstract and the concrete. Terms like 'quintessence', 'soul', 'spirit', 'ethos', 'nature', 'life', 'core', 'heart', 'centre', 'crux', 'nub', 'gist', 'sum', 'substance', 'principle', 'fundamental quality', 'intrinsic nature', 'reality', 'actuality', 'bottomline', 'etc. have connotations of the abstract; whereas expressions like 'nucleus', 'kernel', 'marrow', 'meat', 'pith', 'lifeblood', 'an extract or concentrate obtained from a plant or other matter', 'distillate', 'elixir', 'juice', 'tincture', 'solution', 'suspension', 'dilution', 'scent', 'perfume', 'decoction', etc., seem to be associated with the concrete.

Overall the word 'essence' projects a neat dichotomy between the central vs the periphery, the core vs the margin, the permanent vs the temporary, the necessary vs the accident, the inner vs the outer. Speaking informally it appeals to our sense of security, or the tendency to hold on to something stable and abiding, discarding what is accidental and unstable; it brings the comfort of what is concise and compact, as contrasted with the vast stretch of an unwieldy mass of details.

However I shall not be addressing how the popular appeal of essences turns into a philosophical discourse – though this may be an interesting study by itself. To write an effective introduction to my work I shall at most be trying to effect a smooth transition from some popular or common sensical trends of engaging with essences to the chief nodal points of standard philosophical discourse on essences.

1.1 Class-essence and Individual Essence: The popular rhetoric of essence vs accidents takes hold on both class and an individual. In the former case essence serves - in a manner of speaking – in scooping up individuals in a compact space, by virtue of the common properties they share, no irrespective of the unwieldy motley of differences. All men differing widely and intractably with respect to the time and place of their births and deaths, race, gender, personality-traits, facial features, complexion, height, careers, can be comfortably brought under certain common properties – customarily said to be animality and rationality, or the properties of being featherless and biped. On the other hand, an individual too exhibits a relational structure of its essence vs accident. This point is specially interesting because an individual unlike a class is spatio-temporally cohesive, it forms a unified singular unit; and hence the way in which an essence can be said to bring the spatio-temporally scattered individuals under a fixed and unitary enclosure cannot meaningfully be applied to an individual itself. And yet the individual in spite of its apparently compact unity throws up a tension between its essence and accidents. With inanimate objects the shape, size and colour may change, leaving the constituent matter intact. With animate individuals too, specific features pertaining to face and appearance, life-incidents , may all be pushed to the periphery – calling forth more substantial and abiding features that can reasonably be said to constitute its individual essence. It may be difficult to identify that individual essence, but the existence of this individual essence vis a vis his inessential accidents, gains a philosophical dominance.

1.2 Essence and Its Representation: The question of essence does not only generate a rift between essence and accidents, but also throws up a patently philosophical enigma - essence vs its representation. Essence seems to be a pure unvarying identity , as contrasted with its varying and contingent representations. This schism was vibrant for a long time in philosophy, in both the rationalist and empiricist traditions, where extension and consciousness – the respective essences of matter and mind - threw a challenge of being giving way to, or resisting their reduction to

observable qualities. This is a new dimension in the discourse on essences – where essences came to be looked upon as something beyond their qualitative representations. Essence showed the tendency to become the mystical underlying substratum of qualities - as voiced in Locke's declaration that 'Substance is I know not what'. Here our common sense ideas of essence - i.e. the crude imageries of the copra beneath the husk of the coconut, the extracts of a fruit or a chicken, or even more sophisticated attempts to go beyond the varying shapes, colours, sounds, gets significantly outgrown by the demand of essence being a non-qualitative identity.

The notion of a non-qualitative identity has a natural tendency to turn into that of a bare quantity –from where it starts getting more and more problematic. As philosophers got dissatisfied with this the notions of bare quantity and bare quality they sought to construct a theory that would avoid this unhealthy dichotomy. Incidentally this notion of essence as impredicable substance was introduced by Aristotle himself . That the essence is a 'fundamental subject of predication' which implies an entity which has no properties in itself, but is the bearer of the other varying properties of the object; everything except primary substances is either predicable of a primary substance or present in them. But primary substances are not predicated of anything, they are impredicable in nature. However, these primary substances are not even bare particulars i.e without qualifications. The primary substances are qualified by predicates that are called secondary substances what can alternatively termed as species and genera,i.e kinds. If we have lost track of the theory of essences in its common-sense counterpart let us try to revive this link. Indeed our common sense cannot accept a bare quantitative substratum beyond its qualities or qualitative representations, but what our common sense can accommodate is that anobject has multiple aspects, and the property that an object seems to have essentially under one aspect may belong to the object only contingently under a different aspect. As a woman I have uterus and ovaries essentially, but as a living organism - these are my contingent properties. The furniture on which I am writing has four legs essentially in so far as it is a table, but looked upon as a dwarf's bed, its four legs may easily be replaced by two long bedsteads (in the head and the bottom) keeping its bed-identity intact. Quine gives a much better example as to how the so-called standard essence of man, viz. rationality, turns out to be contingent when an individual man(who happens to be both a cyclist and a mathematician) is looked merely under his cyclist-aspect.

He has further examples as how when number 9 is looked merely as the property of being the

number of planets, its putatively necessary property of being greater than 8 turns out to be contingent.

Now even our untutored common sense - if confronted with these examples – strives to find a new route to handle this puzzlement – which takes the shape of the following question : Does a thing have an essence essentially or contingently, or does a thing have its so-called essence by itself or in relation to something. The second alternative can be rephrased as – the object having its so-called essence only in so far as the object is conceptualised or propositionalised.

What we can commonly appreciate as an issue whether the essence belongs to a thing only relatively or whether it belongs to it absolutely or really - has earned a full-mouthed technical terminology in philosophical literature. If essence belong to objects really or inalienably - irrespective of any mode of conception - it would be termed as 'de re', whereas if essence belongs to an object only in so far as the object is conceived in a proposition the essence will be termed as 'de dicto'. Thus when adverbs like 'essentially' or 'necessarily' is coupled to a noun - say 'Paul' or 'table', they (i.e. these adverbs) do not touch the 'extension' (real referents) of 'Paul' or 'table' - they only pertain to an 'intension' or mode of conceiving Paul and the tables. Speaking in philosophical terminology, the anti-essentialists would hold the adverbs like 'essentially' or 'necessarily' as being 'referentially opaque', as these adverbs actually refer to the mode of conceptions that come as intermediary screens between the real object on the one hand and the subject on the other. An upholder of de re essence will hold these adverbs to be 'referentially transparent'.

2.1 Kripke-Putnam's view on essence

In modern times Kripke and Putnam come forward with the programme of supplying a better theory of essences - that would avoid the rift between the bare quantity and bare quality. However their theories have to retain a gap between an underlying essence and its variant modes of representation. The crux of their theories rests on the insistence that the fact that we talk meaningfully of the variant modes of representation of an object shows not only that we have to talk meaningfully of an underlying essence, but that there is a real essence , which is not a bare quantity, but can always elude qualitative representation. To take the three kinds of examples that we have already mentioned –

a. that we talk of a wooden piece of furniture being conceivable under various aspects (a desk or

a dwarf's bed) shows that our talk is geared to real invariable entity that spills over all differences of representation or conceptualisation. This real identity is the material origin of the table – the singular hunk of wood or the multiple pieces of wood from which the table has been constructed.

b. Paul may be both rational under a particular aspect of being a mathematician and not rational under the aspect of being a cyclist, but to float these aspectual differences, the speaker has to be non-conceptually (causally) related to the essential identity of Paul. This essential identity according to Kripke is constituted by the material origin, i.e., the gametes from which Paul is born. However much one may try to de-essentialise an object or a person - by activating its different aspects, one cannot get past these pre-aspectual essences that are the pre-conditions of a thing being put under various aspects or modes of conception.

c. A number – say nine - may be put under various modes of conception, like being the number of planets, sum of three and six drops of water, each of which may be alienated from nine – by a thought-experiment; but we cannot alienate number nine from an essential reality (say of 8+1) by any effort of a spectualisation or conceptualisation. To insist on 8+1 as being a dispensable aspect of 9 is to be ontologically affixed to the essence of 8+1 itself. To think of the length of the one meter scale is varying under different changes of pressure and temperature is to be referring to the irrevocable identity of one meter itself – an identity beyond all imaginations and thought-experiments.

Besides one can appreciate in a different way that any exercise to discard essences by relativising it to a mode of conception will itself presume essences that are inadmissible even for the essentialists. To insist that A is an essential property of x only in so far as x has the property B is virtually to turn B into an essence of A. For instance to insist that Paul has the property of bipedness only in so far as he has the property of being a cyclist is to essentialise the notion of a cyclist – for one can very well say that it is only well-formed cyclists , i.e. cyclists under a mode of conception, who are bipeds. Similar contentions can be urged in favour of the property of fourleggedness belonging to an object in relation to its being a table, or ovaries belonging to a human in relation to her womanhood.

In the light of the above discussion our common sense can train itself to get a smooth entry-point into the patently pedantic and technical discourse on Essentialism. The first step to appreciate a distinction between essence and accident is to reckon that when essence is seen throughobservable

properties – these properties may turn contingent, whereby the essence itself has a tendency to become non-qualitative. To take familiar examples given by Kripke, the essence of heat turns non-qualitative , for the felt quality of burning, or the feeling of molecular rapidity turns out to be contingent – in so far as there may be subjects with a different kind of physiological constitution who feel heat as cold, or as molecular slowness , though heat itself is molecular rapidity. Kripke has also spoken about mass-illusions whereby certain reptiles in a locality are perceived as having the external appearance of lions or tigers. This for Kripke only shows that reptiles may be falsely perceived under the quality of mammals – a possibility that only highlights the rift between essences and observable qualities.

Secondly essences also take up a tendency to become individual as contrasted with a general essence or class-property, perhaps because being non-qualitative, the structure of general repeatable feature vsa non-repeatable individual (i.e. the structure that is present in a general essence) is no longer available if the essence becomes non-qualitative. If essence of one meter or number nine becomes independent of all observable properties (of the meter scale kept in Paris, or the properties of the cluster of planets), if the essence of water as H2O breaks free from its observational properties (i.e. H2O images seen under a microscope) then this non-qualitative essence comes to lack the relational structure of a general vs a particular. In other words such an essence cannot be given the status of a general essence.

Another interesting issue comes up along with the question of essence vs accident, or the question of the essence itself as being conceivable in different ways. Put in a different way – this becomes an engagement with what if it were otherwise - i.e., it becomes a popular appeal to tampering with the object in our imagination, entertaining different counterfactuals or making thought-experiment, or operating in a subjunctive mood. In philosophical parlance this is the issue of possible worlds, and with the different approaches to essence different theories of possible worlds, and different answers to the question of a retaining the same identity across possible worlds also come up. That is, when essence is claimed to be something that is indispensable – the issue of recurrability of that self-identical essence across its different configurations or combinations also come up. This is the issue of possible worlds that takes the shape of a philosophical problem - viz. whether a thing can retain its identity across possible worlds i.e. in spite of having different properties. Leibnitz will not admit it to be so – for him if the so-called same thing has different properties in another world

the thing itself will be different. This is the view that all properties are instantiated in a unique way, so that there cannot be any general essences.

2.2 Plantinga on Essence

Plantinga on the other hand will say that tothink of a thing has having different properties in different possible worlds is to commit oneself tothe thing being so enmeshed with its properties that whenever it is conceived as having different properties in different worlds this thing that is recurring is already enmeshed with its original world-specific properties.

Further when the transworld essence comes up as non-qualitative the issues of space and time also come up inevitably. To be non-qualitative, does it mean that it is a bare space-time boundary having no qualitative content? Neither Kripke for whom the essence is non-qualitative nor Leibnitz for whom essence is always qualitative would space have the ontology of a bare container. For Leibnitz space is relational, i.e. by which he means that it is a not a abstract structure in which different things can be put, the relational structure changes with its so-called content. This gets further revealed when Leibnitz demonstrates that however much we try to retain two things as qualitatively identical, but dispersed in different space and /or times; i.e., however much we try to make them numerically distinct but qualitatively indiscernible – their spatio-temporal differences will amount to two different sets of relational properties, making them qualitatively different. Thus space-time cannot serve as a bare container amounting to the non-qualitative transworld essence.

From this insight another vital conclusion emerges – when we try to retain the same thing across possible worlds we should not end up conceiving the same thing being in a different spatial or temporal position within the same space-time coordinate. If we do so then we end up in conceiving two instances of the same concept and not the same thing in two possible worlds. For Leibnitz it will not be the same thing in two worlds because their being in different spatial positions within the same space-time coordinate defines them with different qualities –or different degrees of appetition – thus two different things altogether. For Kripke they will not be the same thing in two different worlds, rather it is a question whether the same space-time expanse that this actual world is can two exact facsimiles. The situation does not offer a transworld variation of the same thing, but a transworld variation of the same space-time expanse.

This tussle about essence as a transworldidentity includes two crucial but negative demands. As already noted the first demandis that the world -differences are not differences between qualitatively indiscernible objects situated in different space-time positions. Secondly the world-differences cannot be different frameworks of space-time - say between linear and non-linear time or that between Euclidean and non-Euclidean space – for then we cannot legitimately speak of the same individual recurring along these different space-time frameworks. Positively speaking, this individual identity ultimately becomes not non-qualitative , but primitive, that which becomes the ground of its spatio-temporal identity in the same world, and also perhaps the ground of its identity across different possible worlds. It is also claimed to explain why an individual comes to be subsumed under certain broad categories - say a human person, and not a football game or a dream. However if this identity is non-qualitative then one cannot demonstrate the connexion between this identity and the possession of certain properties (and not others) conceptually in the shape of analytic propositions.

Philosophers have tried to treat the issue of essence from the point of view of language and meaning as well. For instance early Wittgenstein had sought to show how language with a determinate sense must be geared to absolute simples in reality – the nature of which is fixed through a determinate range of combination in logical space. We have also noted how neo-essentialists like Kripke and Putnam worked their way to real essences from the nature of counter-factual statements and the special inflexible nature of certain linguistic expressions. Quine's refutation of essences also took off from the issue of meaning and synonymy, and the nature ofthe modal adverb 'necessarily'. One of Quine's main arguments against essentialism is that it is full of contradiction. For Quine, meaning or synonymy is ultimately determined by the particular scheme of beliefs imposed on a barrage of sensory stimulations. As our given sense-data do not have any meaning of their own and are dependent on some suitable description themselves, so for Quine, neither de dicto nor de re essence (based on the real nature of things) is possible. Necessity resides in the way we talk about the thing not in the thing itself.

2.3 W.V.O Quine on essence

Quine does not limit himself within the scope of reference and its modes. His semantic thesis asserts that reference is pure in so far as it does not characterize the referent. Quine proceeds on with his program of limiting reference to pure reference that is the reference is free from the inference of language. To refer an object with singular terms like Plato, this book, the author of Geetanjali such terms do not refer to reality by virtue of their publicly reputed status as

predicateless proper names but by virtue of the fact that they fall under a concept. From the standpoint of language, we can uphold that the terms that appear to be singular are not at all singular terms, they actually are bound variables, there are no singular terms. It is true that the task of referring is ultimately dependent on using some singular terms roughly exemplifying 'Men in general refers to man' only because to exemplify 'Socrates' refers to the individual known as Socrates and 'Plato' refers to the man called Plato. But the problem is there are singular terms having no reference so to solve the problem Quine favours the elimination of singular terms .

For later Wittgenstein – necessity and contingency, essence and accident are alternative language-games or modes of usage. Wittgenstein will neither commit himself to ontological necessity, nor necessity being a matter of scheme-relative propositions in the Quinean sense. That necessity becomes relative to a conceptual scheme, that 'bachelors' and 'unmarried man' or that '9' and the 'number of planets' become synonyms in a particular conceptual scheme itself becomes further relative, itself turns out to be opaque, for one can never extract a necessity absolutely from a particular mode of relativisation. To ensure how necessity is being generated as relative to a conceptual scheme – Quine had to invest the relativisor and the relativised with transparent identities or essences - and it is this commitment that Wittgenstein problematises. The main point is that while all the anti-essentialists have been trying to reduce de re necessity to de dicto necessity, or de dicto necessity further to a scheme of beliefs, Wittgenstein will be saying that we cannot lay out this realtivising exercise in the form of a proposition. All attempts to establish essences, or the contrary exercises to relativise them to a particular set of presumptions, are themselves language-games – they boil down to usage and practices that do not rest on any foundation.

2.4 Wittgenstein's attack on essence

However in Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein attacked essentialism by rejecting the picture theory, and the search for commonality and uniformity. He denied essence, the universal, the common element present in all the objects of a class and accepted only an indeterminate and incomplete flow of the criss-crossing, the overlapping features. For him language is constituted by an ever expanding flow of uses, which he called language-games. The significance of the term 'language-game' lies in the fact that like games language too is not based on any ontology that would confer a common essence across all the widely divergent uses. Nor did Wittgenstein accept any hidden essence behind appearance. In

fine the later Wittgenstein denied both analysis and essence and propagated description of usage and behaviours as the only method of philosophy. Later Wittgenstein will neither commit himself to ontological necessity, nor to necessity being a matter of scheme-relative propositions in the Quinean sense. Quine's claim that necessity becomes relative to a conceptual scheme, that 'bachelors' and 'unmarried man' or that '9' and the 'number of planets' become synonyms in a particular conceptual scheme, itself becomes further relative. That is to say the so-called scheme-relative necessity itself turns out to be opaque, for one can never extract a necessity absolutely from a particular mode of relativisation. To ensure how necessity is being generated as relative to a conceptual scheme – Quine had to invest the relativisor and the relativised with transparent identities or essences - and within Wittgenstein's later writings one can gather insights for problematising this Quinean commitment. The main point is that while all the anti-essentialists have been trying to reduce de re necessity to de dicto necessity, or de dicto necessity further to a scheme of beliefs, Wittgenstein will be saying that we cannot lay out this realtivising exercise in the form of a neat hypothesis – i.e in the form of a proposition. On the other hand we have seen that all attempts to establish de re essences hark back on changeless a historical identities of objects - that are manifestly claimed to lie beyond any spatio-temporal relations and interactions. For later Wittgenstein all attempts to establish essences, or the contrary exercises to relativise them to a particular set of presumptions, are themselves language-games – they boil down to usage and practices that do not rest on any foundation.

Conclusion:

The vital fall-out of Wittgenstein's non-essentialism seems to be aspiraling tension between two

parallel endeavours. The more you try to disperse essences, make them relative or peripheral, the

more the essentialists will show the underlying essence exploding through such anti-essentialising

exercise. And parallelly, more the anti-essentialist will seek to project the multiple characters and

relativise them under different schemes more will Wittgenstein seek to disperse the essentialist

frames underlying these schemes themselves. And more will he try to show that the claim of an

underlying identity spilling over all modes of conceptions is simply an architectonic or formal

requirement having no ontological content. However the fact that indeterminacies do not go on forever ,
the fact that even machines can be

trained to be sensitised to certain quantitative boundaries and qualitative identities speak in favour

 of underlying essences – that are independent of human needs, interests or forms of living. Any

investigation into essences should be geared to a ruthless task of problematising essences and not

presuming them at the outset. Otherwise we cannot ensure that we achieved our outcome through

an honest and laborious exercise, and not through a popular rhetorics or the common-sense

imageries of a permanent beyond temporary, an abiding beyond the transient, or a core beyond the

husk.

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