

Essence of Objects

If an object has a degree of unity (and is not a mere aggregate), and qualifies as a 'substance' to which properties attach, the object can also be said to have an 'essence'. This is traditionally understood as the 'nature' of the object, fixing what the object itself is like, and the general family of objects to which it belongs. This view became discredited when modern science abandoned 'substantial forms', preferring to explain objects through the matter of which they were composed, though modern metaphysicians retain a keen interest in this concept of essence. When modern logicians became interested in how to refer to objects in possibly different situations, a rather different concept of essence emerged, as whatever ensured that we were still referring to the same thing, despite possible changes. The older concept was of some hidden core nature to the object, which dictated its qualities and behaviour, and gave it the unity needed to endure through superficial changes. The modern concept is of a set of properties which the object must always possess, as long as it exists. For example we might say that we refer to a particular person only if they retain the same parents, or refer to the same table as long as it is made of that material. The older concept is a full intrinsic explanation of the object, and the modern concept is an unwavering way to individuate the object. Fans of the newer view have little interest in the old concept, and fans of the old concept resent the modern attempt to hijack it.

To consider the older view first, essences were proposed for similar reasons to those which pointed to the general idea of 'substance' – that something must unify an object, enable it to persist through change, and support the object's predicates. The additional idea of essentialism was that each object has a distinctive 'nature' (a what-it-is-to-be-that-thing), which is the underlying cause of the object and its powers. Nature was not explained by modern 'laws', but by the essences of objects.

A difficult aspect of this theory is whether such essences, the root causes of an object's way of being, are unique to each individual, or whether they are something shared between objects of the same kind. If we aim to understand a cat, the fact that it is a cat tells us far more than more its unique features can reveal. Cats have a huge amount in common. One view is that the essence of a cat is simply what it has in common with all the other cats, so that being a member of that species explains everything important about it. An essence is thus the core features of a *kind* of thing. The rival view says each cat is slightly different, with its own inner essence which needs to be understood, and it is just classified as a cat because it happens to share a huge amount with many similar mammals. Nominalists, who say that only particular things exist, will tend to favour individual essences, where defenders of the generic view of essences say that the essences of kinds is the entire subject-matter of science, since individuals differ too much.

This debate focuses on 'real' essences, which are features of the actual objects and kinds, but the truths about essence must be expressed in language, and this concerns definitions, which can be either 'real' or 'nominal'. A real definition aims to specify the essences of objects, and the nominal definition gives the qualities and appearances that we use to name and classify them. Language relies almost entirely on universal terms (such as 'cat' or 'white'), and so it is the generic essences which come to the fore in definition, but definitions may still aspire to specify individuals. We usually talk in generalities about cats, but I can dream of telling you what is unique about my cat. Later thinkers proposed a possible unique feature (a 'haecceity', or 'thisness') which only one individual can possess. There could, of course, be more than one definition of an object, so these are presumably attempts to pinpoint the real essence.

The modern view results from the idea of possible worlds, as a device for interpreting reasoning about necessities and possibilities. 'He might have been taller' is understood as a possible world in which he is taller. But if he is taller in that world, is he the same person? We evidently need him to be *essentially* the same person, despite being taller. If we take an object or person to be described by a set of relevant predicates, these will be divided into a contingent and a necessary group, and the essence is then the necessary predicates. There are no rules for deciding which predicates form the essence, other than saying when we would no longer acknowledge that we are talking about the same object. The issue for modern essentialism is whether this division of the predicates of a thing into contingent and necessary can be done, or even makes sense. Critics say that which predicates appear necessary depends on how the thing is described, or that none of an object's predicates are necessary (so that we can reasonably ask whether an egg might have been a proton). In the modern theory the essence is some necessary predicates, but calling predicates 'essential' or 'necessary now' mean the same thing. Since trivial predicates can be necessary to a thing, it is sometimes added that the essential predicates must be 'important', but that may imply a different theory.

If we just look at some object like a clock or a bird, and ask what its essence is, there is no obvious way to give an answer. Essentialism seems to be a response to our need to individuate, or name, or describe, or classify, or explain an object. Hence an essentialist theory must arise from our initial reasons for favouring essentialism. If the generalisations of science have priority, then sortal essentialism (specifying what sort of object it is) will have priority. If individuation in logic matters most, then necessary properties come to the fore. If explanation is the aim, then basic causal powers will seem to characterise essences.

In current philosophy essentialism probably has more enemies than friends. Accounts of science tend to focus on the laws of nature, often expressed mathematically, rather than on the essences of electrons or cats. In logic there are doubts about whether something can be essentially the same even when it changes, because this lacks logical precision. Explanations tend to focus either on laws, or merely on chains of causation, rather than on their source in some mysterious inner essence. Nevertheless, there is obvious attraction in the view that a cat could change, but it could hardly continue to be that object if it ceased to be a cat. We might surmise that you could have been a somewhat different person, but not if you originated differently, with a quite different genetic endowment. And we are familiar with the discovery of core features to a phenomenon which complete our explanation, such as the complete electron shells of the inert noble gases. All of these are candidates for being the essence of something, and the concept of essentialism won't go away, even if it is frustratingly vague, or beyond our grasp.