

A CORRECT ACCOUNT OF ESSENTIALISM?

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Essentialism is the view that among the properties of a thing some are essential, others merely accidental; and some properties are essential to some things, accidental to others. The essential properties of a thing, we are told, are those it has necessarily, those it could not have lacked. Its accidental properties are those it has only contingently, those it might not have had. But we need to be told more. For when the essentialist says, for example, that Aristotle is essentially identical with Aristotle, he obviously means to say something about Aristotle. If what he says is true, then what he says should be true of Aristotle quite independently of the manner in which Aristotle is designated. If Aristotle is essentially identical with Aristotle, that should be true of the author of *De Interpretatione*, the philosopher mentioned on page 199 of *Word and Object*, and the philosopher I am now thinking of; for each of these *is* Aristotle.

It is just here that many philosophers find essentialism baffling. For, they say, Aristotle is essentially identical with Aristotle but the author of *De Interpretatione* is not. In support of this contention it would be observed that whereas

(1) Aristotle is identical with Aristotle

is a necessary truth,

(2) The author of *De Interpretatione* is identical with Aristotle

is not. Now this line of argument succeeds only if it is true

that if the author of *De Interpretatione* is essentially identical with Aristotle, then (2) is a necessary truth. And this latter conditional is one we may expect the essentialist to deny.

But not without difficulties. For critics of essentialism are generally inclined to take the position that there is no problem understanding 'necessary' and 'contingent' when applied to propositions; hence the intelligibility of the contexts 'It is necessarily true that . . .' and 'It is contingently true that . . .' (modalities *de dicto*). But, they continue, such expressions as 'is necessarily rational' and 'is a philosopher contingently' are an entirely different kettle of fish. On the one hand, if these expressions are simply misleading ways of formulating *de dicto* assertions then essentialism is fairly hopeless: by (1) and (2), for example, essentialism would have us believe that one object both has and lacks the very same property essentially. If, on the other hand, 'is necessarily rational' and the other modality *de re* locutions do not admit of a *de dicto* reading, it is hard to see just how the former are to be understood, if at all. There is no doubt a good deal to be said for this view. Perhaps an analogy would be helpful. Consider the grammatical constructions ' x is probably F ' and 'It is probable that x is F '. Here 'probable' has both an adverbial as well as a non-adverbial grammatical construction. Taking our cue from the essentialism are we to conclude that there must be two sorts of probabilities: *de re* and *de dicto*? Hardly. For it seems quite obvious that ' x is probably F ' means no more or less than 'It is probable that x is F '. Putting this point another way, if the first construction does not have the same meaning as the second then the former would seem to have no meaning at all. And this is exactly the sort of criticism directed against the essentialist.

Now this objection to essentialism does not find anything inherently problematic in *de dicto* modalities. Accordingly, the defender of essentialism might seek defense of his position by attempting to explain modality *de re* via modality *de dicto*. Of course, this explanation cannot be the simple one

that an object x has a property P essentially just in case it is necessarily true that x has P ; this, in effect, we have already seen by noticing the necessity of (1) and the contingency of (2).¹ Still, it may be thought that, by some more complicated manner, we may explicate the *de re* in terms of the *de dicto*. What might such a more complicated device come to? The following would suffice: a general explanation that enables us to find, for any modality *de re* proposition, an equivalent modality *de dicto* proposition, or, alternatively, that enables us to replace any sentence containing *de re* expressions by an equivalent sentence containing *de dicto*, but no *de re* expressions. Now Alvin Plantinga has recently attempted to provide such an explanation.² The purpose of the present paper is to assess the merits of Plantinga's very impressive attempt.³

Plantinga gives us his explanation in two stages. First he offers a definition of what it is for an object to have a property "necessarily". Then we have a definition of what it is for a property to be "essential" to an object. The definitions are as follows:

(D1) x has P necessarily if and only if x has P and the proposition x lacks P is necessarily false (where the

¹ Incidentally, the necessity of (1) and the contingency of (2) serves to counterexample a criterion of identity for statements proposed by E. J. Lemmon, "Sentences, Statements, and Propositions" in *British Analytical Philosophy*, Ed. by B. Williams and A. Montefiore (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 103. By Lemmon's criterion (1) and (2) are identical, but surely no necessary statement is identical with any contingent one. For detailed criticism of Lemmon's criterion, see my paper, "Statements and their Identity Conditions," *Logique et Analyse*, vol. XI, No. 44 (1968), pp. 512-515.

² Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 175-180. And his more recent paper, "De Re et De Dicto," *Noûs*, vol. III, No. 3 (September, 1969), pp. 235-258. The second of these is considerably more technical than the first, but the basic account remains unchanged. It is this basic account which I am concerned with here.

³ I am indebted to Hector-Neri Castañeda, Robert Sleigh, and Alvin Plantinga for discussion of these matters. I am also grateful to the members of the Philosophy Department at the University of Houston for a stimulating discussion of an earlier draft of the present paper. Finally I have benefited from Richard Cartwright's paper, "Some Remarks on Essentialism," *Journal of Philosophy*, LXV, No. 20 (October 24, 1968), pp. 615-626.

domain of the variable ' x ' is unlimited but its substituend set contains only proper names, and where the domain of the variable ' P ' is the set of properties and its substituend set contains no definite description or expressions definitionally equivalent to definite descriptions).

- (D2) P is an essential property of x if and only if x has P and there is a being y identical with x and a property P' identical with P such that y has P' necessarily (in the sense of (D1)).⁴

For our discussion of (D1) and (D2) it should prove useful to begin by reviewing the strategy behind Plantinga's rather technical maneuvers.⁵ One perfectly natural question here is why does Plantinga give the *two* definitions? For take any object x and property P such that x has P necessarily. Surely x seems to qualify as something y identical with x and P qualifies just as well as a property P' identical with P such that y has P' necessarily; conversely, if there is some y identical with x and a property P' identical with P such that y has P' necessarily, then by the indiscernibility of identicals it would appear that x has P necessarily. Hence (D2) seems redundant. This appearance is deceptive. The two definitions allow for one and the same object to have a given property essentially but not necessarily. For example, Mark Twain is identical with Samuel Clemens. Consider now Mark Twain and the property *being identical with Samuel Clemens*. Samuel Clemens has this property necessarily because

- (3) Samuel Clemens lacks the property of being identical with Samuel Clemens.

⁴ *God and Other Minds*, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-180.

⁵ Some of the technical problems that forced Plantinga to offer his account of essentialism are closely associated with certain difficulties surrounding a view of *existence* put forward by A. N. Prior and N. Cocchiarella. For details, see my papers: "Prior on Time and Tense," *Review of Metaphysics* (forthcoming); and "Existence and Existence Attributes," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming).

is necessarily false. From this and (D2), it follows that Mark Twain has the same property essentially. But Mark Twain does *not* have this property necessarily since

- (4) Mark Twain lacks the property of being identical with Samuel Clemens

is merely contingently false. According to Plantinga's explanation, then, one object may have the very same property essentially but not necessarily. Now this does deliver (D2) from any charge of redundancy;⁶ but it also turns out to be the very rock upon which Plantinga's account founders. To see this we should take a moment to review Plantinga's reasons for restricting the substituends for the variables ' x ' and ' P ' in (D1).

Consider the result of dropping the restrictions on the substituends for the variables. We would have:

- (D1') x has P necessarily if and only if x has P and the proposition x lacks P is necessarily false.

How would we use (D1') to determine whether a particular object has a given property necessarily? Suppose, for example, that we want to know whether A. J. Foyt has the property of being a racing driver necessarily. Presumably we are to instantiate to A. J. Foyt and being a racing driver, respectively. Foyt has this property necessarily just in case he has the property and the proposition *Foyt lacks the property of being a racing driver* is necessarily false. Clearly enough, this proposition is merely contingently false. On the other hand, Foyt is none other than the racing driver I am

⁶ Here (D2) is not redundant because an object has a property essentially but not necessarily. Let us suppose that Pegasus has the property of being identical with Pegasus. Suppose too that the proposition *Pegasus lacks the property of being identical with Pegasus* is necessarily false. Then Pegasus would have this property necessarily by (D1). But he would not have the property essentially because it is false that there exists an x such that x is identical with Pegasus. So here we would have a case where an object has a property necessarily but not essentially. And we have another reason why (D2) is not redundant.

now thinking of. And the proposition *The racing driver I am now thinking of lacks the property of being a racing driver* seems necessarily false. So we have instantiated the variables 'x' and 'P' and produced conflicting instantiations for one and the same object and one and the same property. Are we to conclude that Foyt both has and lacks this same property necessarily? Hardly. Matters become worse when we consider the expression 'the proposition *x lacks P*' in the *definiens* of (D1'). How are we to understand this? Presumably we are to suppose that for each object *x* and each property *P* there is exactly one proposition that says that *x* lacks *P*. But our conflicting instantiations for Foyt and *being a racing driver* make it very clear that such is not the case. The point here is that *x lacks P* is not a proposition at all; rather we get propositions once we instantiate the variables. Since there are ever so many propositions that say of some object *x* and some property *P* that *x* lacks *P*, some of which are contingently false while others are necessarily false, (D1') is hopelessly inadequate as it stands.

Enter Plantinga. The strategy behind the restrictions on the substituends for 'x' and 'P' is to avoid the problems associated with (D1'). Briefly stated, the program comes to the following. For any object *x* and property *P*, *x* will have exactly one proper name and *P* exactly one canonical designation.⁷ And we limit the substituends for the variables to proper names and canonical designations. According to (D1), it follows that for each object *x* and each property *P*, there will be *exactly one* proposition that says that *x* lacks *P*. Now the point behind (D1) would be this. Take any object *x* and any property *P*. Since there is exactly one proposition that says that *x* lacks *P*, then *x* has *P* necessarily if and only if *that* proposition is necessarily false. With the restrictions on the substituends we have (hopefully) avoided conflicting instan-

⁷ A *canonical designation* of a property is one which, following Plantinga, is neither a definite description nor definitionally equivalent to a definite description. I owe the happy term 'canonical designation' to Richard Cartwright. See his "Some Remarks on Essentialism," *op. cit.*, p. 621.

tiations for each object and each property. And we have now attached perfectly good sense to the previously unclear expression 'the proposition x lacks P '.

It has to be conceded that Plantinga's restrictions on the substituends is a very ingenious proposal. But there are difficulties even so. To begin with, there would appear to be a problem with objects that have several proper names. Consider, for example, the object named by the proper names 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens'. According to (D1), this object has the property of *being identical with Samuel Clemens* necessarily since the proposition *Samuel Clemens lacks the property of being identical with Samuel Clemens* is necessarily false. But consider (once more)

(4) Mark Twain lacks the property of being identical with Samuel Clemens.

(4) is, I should think, only contingently false. If this is so, then (D1) is prey to exactly the same ills which beset (D1'). For once again we would have conflicting instantiations for one and the same object. That is, if (4) is only contingently false, then by (D1) Mark Twain would both have and lack the property of *being identical with Samuel Clemens* necessarily; and if there happens to be several canonical designations for the same property we would have as well conflicting instantiations for one and the same property. The proper conclusion certainly appears to be that Plantinga's maneuvers have failed to solve the problems met earlier by (D1').

But it is not so easy. Suppose, for example, we replace (D1) with something like the following:

(D3) x has P necessarily if and only if some proposition expressed by some sentence formed by concatenating a proper name of x with a canonical designation predicating the lack of P is necessarily false.

Here Samuel Clemens, and thus Mark Twain, will have the property of being identical with Samuel Clemens necessarily

because the proposition *Samuel Clemens is not identical with Samuel Clemens* is necessarily false. And it makes not one bit of difference that (4) is only contingently false. More generally, (D3), unlike (D1) and D1'), does guarantee that every object is essentially self-identical.

So far so good; the existence of objects with several proper names seems to pose no fundamental obstacle.⁸ Are we to conclude that in the combination of (D2) and (D3) we now have a general explanation of the *de re* via the *de dicto*? I think not. Indeed there is a decisive objection to this account that has nothing to do with the technical matter of conflicting instantiations.⁹

It is crucial to bear in mind that the doctrine of essentialism is a battery of related claims, some trivial, others not so trivial. Now admittedly a number of these claims are preserved by Plantinga's *de dicto* account. Are there some properties that all things have essentially? Surely, the property of *being self-identical* would be one example. Are there properties that some things have essentially but other things have not at all? Certainly: nine has the property *being greater than seven* essentially; the number two has the same property neither essentially nor accidentally. Are there properties that some things have essentially but others have accidentally? Yes: the number four has the property *being greater than the number three or being president* essentially; Richard Nixon has it accidentally. And so on and so on. But now a fundamental difficulty looms. For the most historically pervasive view of essentialism, the one which makes essentialism such a philosophically interesting (and hence controversial) doc-

⁸ And if we formulate the *definiens* of (D3) as a subjunctive conditional we may also avoid problems concerning the existence of unnamed objects raised by Richard Cartwright, "Some Remarks on Essentialism," *op. cit.*, pp. 622-623.

⁹ The reader should be informed that I am now engaging in self-criticism as well as criticism of Plantinga. For I have elsewhere claimed that (D2) and (D3) were acceptable. See my paper, "Plantinga's Puzzles about God and Other Minds," *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. 1, No. 3 (New Series), Spring 1969, pp. 381-384. I now retract that claim.

trine, is not preserved under Plantinga's account. Now the view I have in mind here resists a precise general formulation, as it apparently involves such notoriously obscure notions as *species*, *determinates*, and *natural kinds*.¹⁰ But no matter. For one instance of the general view is the claim that every human being is essentially rational.¹¹ And if there are any intelligible *de re* assertions, surely this is one. Of course anyone who affirms this *de re* assertion is prepared to affirm such singular *de re* propositions as *Aristotle is essentially rational* and *Socrates is essentially rational*. Our query, then, is whether these traditional *de re* assertions are accommodated by Plantinga's explanation.

To facilitate matters, assume that 'Aristotle' is the only name had by Aristotle and 'being rational' is the only canonical designation for the property *being rational*. By (D2) and (D3), Aristotle is essentially rational just in case

(5) Aristotle is not rational

is necessarily false. But is (5) necessarily false? I cannot see that it is. Clearly enough, if (5) is necessarily false, it should entail a contradiction. And so it might be claimed that a contradiction is deducible from (5). But of course (5) does not by itself *formally* entail a contradiction; to get a formal contradiction we must add some proposition or other. On the other hand, we cannot add just any proposition we please. Each proposition to be added must be a necessary truth. True enough, if we add to (5)

(6) Aristotle is a person

and

(7) For any individual x , if x is a person, then x is rational,

¹⁰ But see the very original treatment of these notions by Richard H. Thomason, "Species, Determinates and Natural Kinds," *Noûs*, vol. III, No. 1 (February 1969), pp. 95-101.

¹¹ This essentialist claim is enunciated by Aristotle, the father of essentialism, in *Prior Analytics* i, 9.

the result is a formally inconsistent set. But viewed as an attempt to establish that (5) is necessarily false, the above argument must be judged a miserable failure. The argument succeeds only if (6) and (7) are each necessary truths. And anyone prepared to affirm the contingency of (5) is surely going to pay the same compliment to (6). For good reason, I should think. Aristotle might have been a clever computer, an alien from another world, or anyone of a number of things. But then (6) is not necessarily true and (5) is not necessarily false. The proper conclusion it would seem, is that the combination of (D2) and (D3) is incompetent as an account of the *de re*. Is there, perhaps, some other way of explaining the *de re* via the *de dicto*? And if it should turn out that no *de dicto* account will suffice, how might the *de re* doctrine be explained (if at all)? These are hard questions, and good subjects for further study. But of this much I feel confident: the explanation proposed by Plantinga will not do the job.

RESUMEN

Esencialismo es la concepción que sostiene que entre las propiedades de una cosa, unas son esenciales y otras accidentales. Las propiedades esenciales de una cosa son las que tiene necesariamente, las accidentales, las que tiene contingentemente.

Una crítica común al esencialismo es la siguiente. 'Necesidad' y 'contingencia' pueden entenderse aplicados a proposiciones (modalidad *de dicto*), pero no a objetos (modalidad *de re*). Si las formulaciones del esencialismo en términos *de re* no admiten una expresión en términos *de dicto*, no es claro cómo debieran entenderse.

El defensor del esencialismo puede, entonces, buscar una manera de explicar modalidades *de re* en términos *de dicto*. Alvin Plantinga ha tratado de suministrar una explicación semejante (*God and Other Minds*, Cornell Univ. Press, 1967). Este artículo pretende someter a discusión ese intento.

Plantinga define los términos 'tener necesariamente una propiedad' y 'propiedad esencial' de la siguiente manera:

(D1) x tiene necesariamente P si y sólo si x tiene P y la proposición ' x no tiene p ' es necesariamente falsa (con las siguientes restricciones: el dominio de la variable ' x ' es ilimitado pero el conjunto de instancias que pueden sustituirla contiene sólo nombres propios, y el dominio de la variable ' P ' es el conjunto de propiedades y el conjunto de instancias que pueden sustituirla no contiene descripciones definidas o expresiones equivalentes por definición a descripciones definidas).

(D2) P es una propiedad esencial de x si y sólo si x tiene P y hay un ente y idéntico con x y una propiedad P' idéntica con P , tales que y tiene necesariamente P' .

Se revisan algunos problemas a que conducen estas definiciones. A primera vista (D2) parece redundante. Pero no hay tal. Las dos definiciones permiten que un objeto tenga una propiedad esencialmente pero no necesariamente. Las restricciones a (D1) son también indispensables. Aseguran que para cada objeto x y para cada propiedad P habrá sólo una y no varias proposiciones que dicen que ' x no tiene P '. De no tomarlas en cuenta, x podría sustituirse por varios nombres y P por varias descripciones distintas, que podrían entrar en conflicto con la proposición ' x no tiene P '.

Con todo, se suscitan dos dificultades.

1. Objetos que tienen varios nombres propios. Por ejemplo, el objeto nombrado por Mark Twain y Samuel Clemens. Según (D1) este

objeto tiene necesariamente la propiedad de *ser idéntico con Samuel Clemens*. Pero la proposición 'Mark Twain no tiene la propiedad de ser idéntico con Samuel Clemens' es sólo contingentemente falsa. Entonces, por (D1) Mark Twain tendría y a la vez no tendría necesariamente la propiedad de *ser idéntico con Samuel Clemens*.

Para evitar esta dificultad podríamos reemplazar (D1) por (D3): x tiene necesariamente P si sólo si una proposición expresada por una oración formada concatenando un nombre propio de x con una designación canónica que predique que x no tiene P es necesariamente falsa ('designación canónica' de una propiedad es aquella que no es una descripción definida ni es equivalente por definición a una descripción definida). Aplicando (D2) y (D3), Samuel Clemens y Mark Twain tienen necesariamente la propiedad de *ser idéntico con Samuel Clemens*, porque la proposición 'Samuel Clemens no es idéntico con Samuel Clemens' es necesariamente falsa, y ya no importa que la proposición 'Mark Twain no tiene la propiedad de ser idéntico con Samuel Clemens' sea falsa sólo contingentemente. Así, la existencia de objetos con varios nombres propios ya no ofrece dificultad.

2. Pero hay otra objeción contra (D3). La concepción filosófica más interesante del esencialismo no se preserva con la interpretación de Plantinga. Una instancia de esa concepción es que todo ser humano es esencialmente racional. Luego, Aristóteles es esencialmente racional. ¿Son explicadas estas aseveraciones *de re* por la interpretación de Plantinga? Por (D2) y (D3) Aristóteles es esencialmente racional si y sólo si la proposición (1) 'Aristóteles no es racional' es necesariamente falsa. Pero si (1) fuese necesariamente falsa implicaría una contradicción. Y (1) por sí misma no implica formalmente una contradicción. Para obtenerla, debemos añadir otras proposiciones y éstas deben ser verdades necesarias. Por ejemplo, si añadimos (2) 'Aristóteles es una persona' y (3) 'Para todo individuo x , si x es una persona x es racional', el resultado es formalmente inconsistente. Pero falla como argumento para establecer que (1) es necesariamente falsa. En efecto, el argumento sólo acertaría si (2) y (3) fueran verdades necesarias. Pero cualquiera que afirmara que (1) es contingente, afirmaría lo mismo de (2) y de (3). Y si (2) y (3) no son necesariamente verdaderas, tampoco lo es (1).

La conclusión es que tampoco una combinación de (D2) y (D3) puede explicar las locuciones *de re*, en el esencialismo, mediante locuciones *de dicto*. Luego la explicación propuesta por Plantinga falla.